

# SOME GREAT GOOD, DEARLY HELD



Suggested Remarks for the Use of  
DAV Speakers at Observances of

## MEMORIAL DAY 2007

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

Wounded six times in the Civil War, Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain knew what he was talking about when he stepped up to the podium on Memorial Day 1897.

He spoke of the heroism of his fellow veterans with great eloquence, saying:

“However humble or unknown, they have renounced what are accounted pleasures and cheerfully undertaken all self-denials – privations, toils, dangers, sufferings, sicknesses, mutilations, life-long hurts and losses, death itself – for some great good, dimly seen but dearly held.”

Chamberlain's words describe a war a century and half in the past. Yet his phrases apply to our warriors in Iraq and Afghanistan – so many on their second or third tours of combat.

They ring true in portraying Chamberlain's own forebears, who served with honor in the American Revolution and the War of 1812.

And what about those who stand here today, recalling those we hold dear in our own memories? I speak of:

- those who defended this great land of ours ...
- those who lived through the horror of war ...
- those who came home sick or injured ...
- and especially today, those who breathed their last in battle.

On Memorial Day, they live on in memory– those who died in the World Wars, Korea, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf, and the many military conflicts that engaged our troops and naval forces during these past decades.

To echo Lawrence Chamberlain, they're heroes, "however humble or unknown."

Surely each gave up the ease and security of civilian life – leaving farm and factory, home and classroom, to defend the United States and the freedoms we enjoy.

After giving up the sanctuary of a college professorship to command troops in many bloody battles, Chamberlain knew the meaning of that sacrifice. Recalling the many dead he buried, the intent of Memorial Day was forever etched in his heart.

As I picture his soldier's heart, I think of our troops today – how much they suffer in Iraq and Afghanistan, and how much their families sacrifice.

So much is asked of them ... yet so little is required from the rest of us that Americans sometimes feel that they're left scrambling for ways to support the troops.

Please, if you're searching for a meaningful way to help, turn to the DAV and the other veterans' organizations.

Helping these young, returning troops – and all of America's veterans – is the cause that moves our veterans' groups into action.

We'll find ways to put your good *intentions* to good *purpose* on behalf of those, as Chamberlain described, suffering sicknesses, mutilations, life-long hurts and losses. You can count on it.

In offering this promise, I think of the purpose of Memorial Day. At this time of year, we often say the best way to honor the dead is to serve those who lived but need our help.

The veterans' organizations and their auxiliary treasure those who respond to that call. We cherish the goodness that moves their hearts. We revere their patriotism. And that's you, isn't it!

If you came here today to honor our nation's fallen heroes, you're among those who know why they sacrificed everything. In Lawrence Chamberlain's words, they did it "for some great good, dimly seem but dearly held."

That deep sentiment stirs your heart as well. That's true whether you're a veteran, yourself ... a member of a veteran's family ... or a patriotic person who came to pay respect to the dead.

There's enormous purity in being moved to action by "some great good." And in your own American spirit, you share that special purity.

Throughout American history, we've worked hard to cultivate this willingness to give of one's self for the good of our country.

And today, we see its most generous expression in our armed forces.

But this selfless patriotism sometimes gets lost among our nation's leaders. We saw this in March when war-wounded veterans were found living in squalor at our nation's premier military hospital.

The scandal at Walter Reed Army Medical Center blew the lid off the hypocrisy of government policy toward our country's disabled heroes.

Immediately, questions rose about other military hospitals. And heads turned toward our suffering veterans' hospitals. You saw the news. Additional problems quickly surfaced.

As Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee Member Patty Murray said about the VA medical system, "Who's been minding the store? They keep putting Band-Aids on problems, when what the agency needs is major triage."

Suddenly ordinary Americans saw the vast canyon of pretense that gapes between the words and the actions of some of America's highest leaders.

Bright talk about supporting our troops sounds good in the public square. But it wears thin when leaders can't come up with money to replace moldy drywall and filthy, worn-out carpet.

Needless to say, Americans weren't impressed when the blame games and finger pointing began.

Good people across the country sat in front of their TV sets in shock. "How could this possibly happen?" they asked. "When did this begin?"

There are short answers and long answers to those questions, and soon the short answers hit the newspapers.

In part, Walter Reed got in trouble because so much work was put out for contract to the lowest bidder.

Immediately, there were problems with that low bid. Work didn't get off the ground.

That's the short answer to the questions raised by the mess at Walter Reed.

But it's sure not the full answer, which grows out of the conviction that stands at the heart of my organization's position in this crisis:

***The Disabled American Veterans believes it's high time – and past time – to stop putting dollar signs ahead of veterans who shed their blood and sacrifice their health for our nation!***

Walter Reed was the tip of a huge and ugly iceberg. And the DAV hopes America's policy makers will understand that this is not a one-time problem with an easy fix.

The truth is this: Since the mid-1970s, care for America's disabled defenders has faced severe financial pressure. As the Vietnam War wound down, treatment in the military and veterans' medical systems lost priority.

Politicians talked about "record funding" every year, but those budgets never kept pace as inflation in the medical economy soared.

Year by year, erosion in real-dollar funding did its damage.

Over three decades, the damage was devastating.

The Department of Veterans Affairs did manage to keep the quality of actual medical care at the highest levels. But there was a terrible cost.

Budgets were so tight; VA facilities had to scrimp on everything else – literally *everything* else. Repairs and maintenance were put off so money could be used for needed medical care!

Under these conditions, it's no surprise that a colony of bats took up residence at a VA facility in the northwest!

If a hospital administrator has trouble finding money for doctors, nurses and operating rooms, bat eradication is an inconvenience, not an emergency!

Over the past six years, our government has shortchanged health care for veterans even while America's wartime casualties continued to mount.

No excuse is possible here – not even the idea that no one could foresee the extent of our commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Soon enough, it was clear that these wars would not end after a quick thrust from Kuwait to Baghdad. Yet America's leaders refused to face the human cost that's a necessary part of waging war.

However, this problem began long before Iraq and Afghanistan, and there are few angels in this story.

Both political parties have played games for decades to balance the budget on the backs of disabled veterans.

And, despite the very public hand-wringing over the Walter Reed scandal, no one in Washington can claim ignorance.

The DAV and other veterans' organizations have been laying evidence of serious problems on the table in Washington for years.

We have friends in Washington, don't get me wrong. And we're grateful.

However, over the past thirty years, we faced too much intentional blindness and willful ignorance. Leaders invite tragedy when they close their eyes to what they don't want to see and stay ignorant of what they don't want to know.

Tragedy occurred in Building 18 at Walter Reed, and this isn't the only military medical facility where problems exist. Tragedy has haunted the VA hospital halls for decades.

Tragedy will continue as long as health care funding for disabled heroes is a battle subject to political whims in Washington, D.C.

Let's be clear, this is a battle in which military and VA hospitals must compete with every other cause that wants government funding – from the most worthy to the most ridiculous.

In describing America's obligation to veterans, Theodore Roosevelt said, "A man who is good enough to shed his blood for his country is good enough to get a square deal afterward."

This is not a political statement.

On the walls of the VA's Central Office in Washington, D.C., Abraham Lincoln's immortal words declare our nation's duty "to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan."

This too is not a political statement. It's a proclamation of a national obligation.

So the veterans' organizations ask – *no, we demand* – that our nation's leaders meet that obligation head-on. They must remove veterans' health care from the political free-for-all that's called the federal budget process.

Funding for veterans' medical care must be driven by what America's defenders actually need – not by what can be scraped together in a mad scramble for government dollars.

At our request, friends in the Senate and House of Representatives have once again introduced legislation to guarantee full and timely funding for veterans' medical programs.

This is an extremely important need, and we will win – if not soon then soon enough. Our teeth are sunk into this urgent issue. We will not give up.

Mandatory funding will be our legacy to Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, who will still need VA health care 50 and 60 years from now. We will not leave them with the mess that so many of us have struggled with for decades.

As we seek mandatory funding for VA health care, we must watch what our leaders actually *do*, rather than just listen to what they say.

They must understand that supporting the troops means just what it says: *supporting the TROOPS!*

This phrase does not mean support for politicians and political parties. It means doing what's best for men and women who are defending – and have defended – our country and our freedom.

Empty phrases have no meaning. This Memorial Day, if our leaders want to honor those who sacrificed their lives for America, they must support our troops with action. You and I will make that happen.

Thank you once again for coming to observe Memorial Day, showing your devotion for our nation's honored dead.

It is true that your presence here today is moved by “some great good, dearly held.” And I thank you for your commitment to the men and women who have preserved our freedom.

