

Suggested Remarks for



Memorial Day 2010

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

We have a difficult but important duty today, paying homage to America's finest heroes who gave everything in defense of our freedom.

Difficult in that while more than 1.2 million men and women have perished in or as a result of military conflicts, we still are able to live in a free society infinite in its variety, sometimes turbulent, but all the more valuable for having been tested by adversity.

There have been many who have sacrificed terribly to maintain our nation's independence, our democracy.

But today is for those who are forever lost to us – those who made the ultimate sacrifice.

Today we mourn the loss of these fine men and women. We mourn the loss of our family members, our friends, our heroes. We mourn the loss of those who have done so much to make this country great.

The men and women we honor today were real people – sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, wives and husbands. They were strong and vibrant. They loved and were loved. And they are missed.

Today is not about celebrating the beginning of the summer season or sales at the shopping mall. Today is a solemn day of remembrance, a day that should be properly set aside for nationwide mourning.

Unfortunately, that sentiment is not always shared. There are those who fail to understand what had to be given in order to win and preserve our freedom.

That is why I want to extend the DAV's sincere thanks to each of you who decided to come here today.

You are marking this day with the same serious intent with which it was created some 145 years ago – back when it was known as Decoration Day.

You are not taking your freedom for granted. By being here today, you are setting an example for others to follow. And that is as important as ever, as we have so many of our finest young Americans still serving in harm's way.

Within DAV, we have a saying: "The best way to honor the dead is to serve those who lived but came home sick and wounded."

Those who made it home often carry heavy burdens upon their shoulders. They often know they must fight on in honor of their fallen comrades, living life to the fullest in spite of severe disabling injuries or illness.

Elizabeth R. Stoner's poem, "The Crutches' Tune," published in the April 1919 issue of *Everybody's Magazine*, captures the attitude of disabled veterans who were determined to rebuild their lives following the First World War:

*Down the street, with a lilting swing,
Each so bright that never a thing*

*Seems to harass, so proud were they,
One leg gone, but their hearts were gay.*

*Clickety clack, went the crutches' tune
God! How can they be brave so soon!*

*Brave, when I cannot keep back the tears,
Thinking ahead of the crippled years.*

*With a rhythmic swing they passed me by,
And although, at first, I wanted to cry,*

*I didn't, because on each smiling face
Was the peace of God and the pride of race!*

That is well crafted, heart-felt prose, indeed. And the meaning captured within those lines rings true for disabled veterans today.

Disabled American Veterans, the veterans' service organization which I represent, has strived for 90 years to make life better for those who were disabled in wartime military service.

Those 90 years represent more than just time, they represent generations of sacrifice and progress. They represent a team of veterans who left the trenches of the first full scale world war to fight for their rights in the Bonus Army.

They represent the brave men and women who left their jobs and farms to fight in Europe and the Pacific.

They represent the men and women who fought in Korea – the Forgotten War. They represent Vietnam War veterans who served with honor and returned to a nation that failed to welcome them home with open arms.

The years represent the Persian Gulf and Cold War era veterans. And, certainly, they represent the young men and women who have served and are serving in Iraq and Afghanistan today.

In fact, the DAV's significant outreach to our nation's newest veterans has always been one of our top priorities. Since our inception, we have made concerted, continuous efforts to advocate for and serve every disabled veteran alive.

The newest veterans are in many ways the ones with the greatest needs. New to them is the seemingly daunting process necessary to receive their earned and needed care from the Department of Veterans Affairs.

That fact is not unique to the present day. They have long returned to find our government's administrative systems rigid, convoluted and not always ready to meet their generations' particular needs.

Our World War I veterans came home to a nation that had no safety net for those wounded in war. They fought to establish the VA. They organized and stood up for one another.

When the younger men who'd fought in the Second World War returned home, the Great War veterans gradually taught them the lessons they'd learned in their struggle. World War II veterans did the same thing for the Korean War veterans.

By the time Vietnam War veterans returned home there were often growing pains and differences between generations. But at the end of the day, a higher calling – our shared mission of service resolved those differences.

The need for unity and for a shared commitment to the best interests of our young veterans is more critical today than at any time in the history of the veterans' movement.

Hundreds of thousands who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan – the majority of whom have completed multiple combat tours – are going to need our help when they hang up their uniforms.

We, the DAV, are employing and training veterans to serve as military transition officers and national service officers to guide these new veterans, along with our immense network of volunteers, to ensure veterans of the current operations and their families receive the care, benefits and respect they've earned.

We are advocating for change, helping the VA find solutions to the unique needs of those coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan.

It is not productive to compare the Battle of the Bulge to the first invasion of Fallujah, but we do know that soldiers, Marines, sailors and airmen are surviving injuries that they would not have survived in previous wars.

We've all seen veterans endure amputations, but now we are seeing our young come home in droves with traumatic brain injuries.

Post traumatic stress disorder – a condition that technically didn't exist before Vietnam Veterans suffered and the DAV fought on their behalf – is also severe and frighteningly common.

We're recognizing TBI and PTSD more, but that doesn't mean there aren't thousands of veterans returning today and slipping through the cracks. And the two conditions exacerbate each other.

The burdens on these young men and women and their families is extreme. So again, perhaps the most fitting way we can honor those who never made it home is to do all we can to take care of those who did.

Before I close, I want to make one last point: Less than one percent of the population is currently serving in our nation's military. That is far and away the smallest percentage ever for the United States during wartime.

That is a remarkable testament to just how special today's servicemen and servicewomen are. They, like so many in America's history, are putting everything at risk for you, for me and for our future.

Thank you again for coming today, for your patriotism and for your commitment to the men and women of our armed forces – past and present.

May God bless America, those men and women who have been placed in harm's way, and today, especially the fallen.

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