

VETERANS DAY

11 November 2000

(Acknowledgment of introduction, distinguished guests, DAV and Auxiliary officers and members, as well as others in your audience.)

When the poet Louis Simpson calls upon America to remember the sacrifices our veterans have made, he speaks with the force of great personal authority.

Serving with the 101st Airborne Division in World War II, he first saw combat in Normandy.

By the time his unit had fought its way through France, Belgium, Holland, and into Germany, Mr. Simpson had collected two Purple Hearts.

As a writer and as a teacher, Mr. Simpson has returned to the theme of America's forgetfulness again and again.

He tells the story of how he helps young people come to terms with our nation's readiness to forget the heroes of its wars.

In his classroom, he steps up to the blackboard and writes the name of a place where a famous battle was fought in World War I. He then asks if anyone knows anything about this place.

When none of his students raises a hand, he tells them about the battle. He tells his students how many soldiers died in the fighting in this place, and how many were wounded. He talks about how the veterans of this battle believed their day would never be forgotten.

The exercise shows how easily the memory of immense sacrifices just slips away.

Even the memory of a war as recent as the Persian Gulf is sliding into the dark recesses of history. And how many remember the young Americans who braved danger so very recently in Bosnia and Kosovo? What about those who are still there?

Praising our veterans and those who are still in the armed forces, another poet tells the truth in such elegant terms. Marianne Moore speaks of those "whose spirits and whose bodies all too literally were our shield still are our shield."

How many Americans share this deep awareness of what military service means to our nation and how much our men and women in uniform put at risk?

Not many! And that is certain.

We live in a nation of people who take their freedom for granted as if liberty had not been purchased with the blood, the tears, the sweat, and the toil of our armed forces.

Too many Americans take peace for granted as if no one had ever risked danger to make peace a reality.

Like Louis Simpson, we should be outraged by this thoughtless disregard. And like him, we should speak out.

That is why we're gathered here today. We have come together to keep the torch of memory alive. That is what Veterans Day is all about!

And so much is at stake for you, for me, for every veteran in our nation, and for all of our families. Think of it: If the people of our country maintained a full awareness of what veterans have done for America

* They would not put up with it when some of our political leaders try to block funds needed to keep the VA health care system in shape!

* They would not stand for a VA claims processing system that keeps veterans waiting for years before they get the benefits they have earned!

* They would not stand by as widows are cast into poverty because, in most cases, the government turns off the benefits the moment a veteran dies!

* They certainly would *not* be off at the mall, having themselves a shopping spree, on a day like today which is dedicated to respect for those who have preserved our freedoms!

* Nor would they treat another solemn day of observance, Memorial Day, as some kind of rite of summer rather than what it is, a day to revere those who sacrificed life itself in America's wars and armed conflicts!

When I think about the need to encourage Americans to respect their veterans, I recall the terrorist bomb that ripped through the Marine Corps barracks in Beirut, Lebanon, in the autumn of 1983.

And I remember the story of a young lance corporal who suffered burns all over his body in that explosion.

After he was rescued, he lay in the hospital stark still. He could not move. His body was coated with salve, head to toe.

How many people, today, remember the shock we all felt when we saw the news photos of this Marine's barracks blown to bits?

Sadly, not many.

It wasn't a time when America was at war. It was supposedly a time of peace.

If it's all too easy for people to forget those wounded in Vietnam, Korea, the World Wars and the Persian Gulf, does an incident like the Beirut bombing stand a chance of being remembered?

Certainly, back in 1983, we were stunned by the horror of events in Beirut, but most Americans got on with their lives and let the memory slip away.

I guarantee you one thing, though: that young lance corporal now a man approaching middle age remembers that day.

He will never forget! Never!

Let us remember him, too. Let us honor his sacrifice.

Let us ask all Americans to join us in saving the sacred memory of what all of our disabled veterans have done and not just on Veterans Day, but all year long.

Let us call to mind all who set aside their own interests when asked to serve in our armed forces throughout our history.

Let us not forget how they gave themselves over to something larger than themselves at the call of our nation.

Let us cherish the memory of the Navy flyer whose plane went down over a Pacific island in World War II, and how he spent the rest of the war in brutal captivity.

May we never forget the nurse who saved the lives of so many soldiers as bombs exploded around her M.A.S.H. unit, day in and day out, in Korea.

When we look to our country's flag, let us call into our thoughts the Marine who will never again see the red, white and blue who sees nothing but darkness since the explosion of a North Vietnamese rocket destroyed his eyes forever.

Let us hold fast to the memory of the aircraft mechanic who nearly bled to death on a hot, dry runway in Kuwait after one of Saddam Hussein's snipers caught the young airman in his cross hairs.

These are ordinary folks and they are America's heroes. They are ordinary people who did extraordinary things in the cause of our nation.

Such men and such women represent the very best of our country. They deserve only the best that a grateful nation can provide them.

They should not be turned away when they go to a VA medical center, clinic, or nursing home, seeking treatment. There should always be a place for them.

When they put in a claim for VA benefits, they should not have to face years of red tape and waiting. They should be accorded the dignity they earned through service to our nation.

And no veteran should ever be denied a job he or she can do because of a disability. Yet such injustice takes place every day.

The DAV is only one organization, just as Louis Simpson is only one veteran. But the DAV and Mr. Simpson share the grand struggle for the heart of the people of our land.

Let us *all* make that *our* own struggle! Let us *all* seek to win the hearts of our fellow Americans.

As we go out from here today, let us pledge to do whatever we can to help America display the respect she owes her veterans.

Never believe that your own personal contribution to the cause doesn't make much difference.

Your contribution matters. Oh yes, it matters a great deal.

Everything you do brings us one step closer to justice for veterans.

Keep the spirit of Veterans Day alive keep it alive every day of the year.

In coming to this observance today, you have already made a wonderful beginning. I am so grateful to you for being here and for all you do for veterans all year round.

Thank you.