

THE FLAME OF MEMORY



Veterans Day

11 November 2001

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



We gather at a solemn moment in the history of our great nation. On September 11th, terrorists landed a murderous blow against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. They struck hard against freedom in America and around the world.

Right away, we saw the men and women of our Armed Forces placed on the highest level of alert. American troops then deployed to the center of the storm, set to strike against the enemies of all civilized people.

The weeks since the attack have been tense. All of us grieved the dead in New York, in Washington, and in Pennsylvania. All of us witnessed that our world had changed – and changed forever.

But this troubled time has also shown the American people in all of their strength. They have demonstrated seemingly inexhaustible empathy and generosity. They have united behind the cause of freedom.

Yet the difficult days continue. And, at such times, it serves us well to look back at other moments of challenge in our nation's history.

One such day came in the summer of 1783, at the end of the Revolutionary War. George Washington was about to dismiss the army into a new nation, and the soldiers were going home as free human beings.

The end of the war brought a new day for all of the Americas. In the Declaration of Independence, a republic had been proclaimed.

Now, that republic was a reality. It would build new democratic institutions and lay the groundwork of freedom.

But that bright new prospect had come at a very high price, as General Washington pointed out. He stated plainly that the soldiers had purchased liberty with “the price of their blood.”

While those soldiers were joyous in their victory, the great general would not permit himself to share the festivity.

There would be a time – later – for George Washington to celebrate. That would come as he marched his victorious troops through New York City.

On June 18, 1783, however, several worries bore down on the general’s heroic heart. And he shared his concerns in a letter to the governors of the various states.

His words urged his fellow citizens to care for the soldiers returning from the war.

He reminded America's leaders that such was a sacred duty. "A common debt," he called it, "a debt of honor."

General Washington expressed particular concern about those who were coming home seriously ill and injured.

Allow me to quote what the Father of our Country said about compensation for disabled veterans:

"Their peculiar sufferings, their singular merits and claims to that provision, need only to be known to interest the feelings of humanity in their behalf," he stated.

"Nothing but a punctual payment of their annual allowance can rescue them from the most complicated misery.

"Nothing could be a more melancholy and distressing sight than to behold those, who have shed their blood and lost their limbs in the service of the country, [living] without a shelter, without a friend, and without the means of obtaining any of the comforts or necessities of life."

Speaking plainly about what could happen, George Washington even brought up the nightmare image of disabled veterans “compelled to beg their bread from door to door.”

That foul vision crossed no one’s mind on the day the victorious Army paraded through New York. It was a wonderful day. In a letter to a friend, one woman described the high spirits of the soldiers and the crowd that cheered them along.

“The troops that marched in,” she said, “were ill-clad and weather-beaten, and made a forlorn appearance. But then they were *our* troops; and, as I look at them and thought upon all they had done and suffered for us, my heart and my eyes were filled.”

If only such fervor had lasted! If only the American people had held fast to those feelings of respect and gratitude! But the years right after the Revolution told a different story.

Fear gripped the hearts of many otherwise reasonable people.

Recalling how the soldiers had been trained in the arts of war, they felt threatened. Without cause, many looked upon their liberators as brutes capable of great violence.

And General Washington's dreadful prediction came true. In some places, there *were* beggars on the streets – beggars who had lost their arms, their legs, or their sight in combat!

These are sobering thoughts at a time such as this – a time when American forces once again face grave danger in defense of liberty.

On *this* Veterans Day, Americans cannot deceive themselves about the glory of war.

Our sons and our daughters confront the specter of worldwide terrorism. We cannot ignore the fact: There is very little glory in war.

But there *is* suffering! There *is* pain! There *is* sickness, blood and death! These are the true human costs of war.

It is all too easy for most Americans to lull themselves into a false sense that all is well with those who paid that horrible price.

Most believe that a grateful government meets all the needs of our veterans, no questions asked. They feel sure our nation would never fail its veterans. But history presents a very different picture. Let's take a brief look at the past century.

After World War I, sick and wounded veterans were stacked on cots in the hallways of the nation's hospitals. The government could not figure out what to do with them.

The system of veterans' benefits and services was a terrible, confused mess. Crisis followed.

When the veterans returned from World War II, they were greeted as heroes. But within a decade, their healthcare system had declined badly.

Many VA facilities became little more than warehouses for sick and dispirited human beings, who had no place else to go.

If the veterans of the Korean War were forgotten and sometimes ignored, Vietnam veterans were often reviled. Who, today, gives much thought to the men and women who stood off Saddam Hussein in the Persian Gulf?

And what about today? Who remembers the sailors killed and maimed aboard the *USS Cole* just a year ago? When our troops come home from the present crisis, how long will they be remembered?

People are as forgetful today – in the 21st century – as they were in 1783 when George Washington demanded that they *never* forget. And that has an impact on public policy toward veterans.

In the year 2001, as American forces defend freedom loving people here and throughout the world, there is a crisis in government programs for veterans.

Nearly three-quarters of a million veterans' claims are caught up in a backlog in the Department of Veterans Affairs. That's right – 750,000 claims!

Veterans often wait years before their claims are resolved. As the veteran population ages, many World War II and Korean War veterans die before that happens.

If America's citizens were mindful of their veterans, this could never occur! Yet it has been happening for years, despite protests from highly placed government officials.

When he was a member of President Clinton's Cabinet, Jesse Brown made an issue of the need to fix this broken system.

Tony Principi, who serves as Secretary of Veterans Affairs in the Bush Administration, came to his job vowing to set things right. This is one of the most important goals in his agenda.

What's wrong with the people who make up the budget in Congress and the White House? Why don't they listen to such voices from the President's Cabinet?

The answer is simple. They haven't *had* to listen.

As the crisis in veterans' programs quietly grew, no one could foresee September's attack on our country. No one could predict

that Americans would once again be called to man the ramparts for freedom!

The voters were not up in arms about the way our veterans are treated. They weren't even watching. So those veterans *could* be treated poorly ... and they were.

We face a similar situation in the VA healthcare system. Year after year, the VA budget has lagged behind the medical needs of an aging veteran population. And the results are painful to see.

Many sick, elderly and disabled veterans – who really need care from the VA, and have nowhere else to go – are turned away by VA hospitals, clinics and nursing homes.

The VA doesn't want to send these veterans off without care. But, lacking the needed resources, the VA has no choice.

All the while, the American people assume that any veteran can get care for any problem from the government they served. Nothing could be further from the truth!

So what will happen now, if huge waves of sick and wounded veterans come home from the current battle against terrorism? We are not prepared to provide for their medical care! We could repeat the chaos that followed World War I!

Something must be done to help people remember what veterans have sacrificed – not only in times of crisis like this, but for all time.

Something must be done to keep the flame of memory alive!

This is why the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial is being built in Washington, D.C. It will keep the flame of memory burning!

More is at stake than simply paying tribute to past sacrifices – or even the sacrifices being made in our Armed Forces today.

Every year, hundreds of thousands of people will see this new monument.

On each viewing, an American citizen will receive a powerful reminder that freedom is not free.

They will remember that our nation's disabled veterans pay the price of freedom with pain and hardship that never end.

Further, as our nation's leaders drive through Washington, D.C., this memorial will give them a frequent and necessary reminder of freedom's price.

These are the reasons I hope you'll join me in supporting this essential new monument.

When you do, you will keep faith with America's soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines and Coast Guardsmen. You will stand by them as they guard the great principles of freedom in today's dangerous world.

For the good of these loyal young Americans, you will echo the words of George Washington, who pleaded with Congress to remember "the veterans who have patiently endured hunger,

nakedness, and cold ... who have suffered and bled without a murmur.”

Thank you for being here today. Your presence tells me that you stand ready to make sure the flame of memory never dies.

May you be blessed. And, in this hour of trial, may those blessings fall upon the United States of America.

DAV ✪ DAV ✪ DAV