

Veterans Day: a Day of Honor, Dignity, Respect and Obligation



Suggested Remarks for DAV Speakers At Observances of Veterans Day, 2003

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

It happened on a hot day last June in Baghdad. Members of the 82nd Airborne Division had set up a weapons checkpoint.

It was part of an effort to quell the violence that followed the major combat in Iraq.

A van with four passengers stopped in an alley about 250 yards away, and two men got out. In the busy traffic, there was no immediate cause for concern – not until both men lifted grenade launchers to their shoulders and fired.

One rocket-propelled grenade struck the vehicle our troops were using. The other hit the ground just in front of the Americans. And two brave young soldiers were down.

In no time, the attackers jumped back into their van and sped off as frightened Iraqi civilians stood screaming in the streets.

With the help of the local people, U.S. forces searched the area, looking for the attackers. But the guerilla fighters were never caught.

The wounded Americans were rushed to a field medical facility for treatment.

One died very soon after the incident. The other was critically injured ... and will live with the impact of his wounds for the rest of his life.

This happened on June 6th, 2003. But it's a scene that has been repeated time and again since the President announced the end of major combat operations in Iraq on May 1st.

And it was no accident that one of the Iraqi terrorists launched his grenade into the dirt in front of the American GIs.

It was not his intention to kill all of the Americans at that checkpoint. By aiming into the dirt, an enemy fighter can achieve a devilish goal with a grenade launcher.

In causing horrible wounds to the legs, these goons hope to demoralize our GIs. One wonders what they want to gain with such brutality.

It's like Major Scott Slaten of the Army's 1st Armored Division said in a recent Associated Press news report:

“These are guys who want us to fail. They'd rather see their own country burn than have it succeed.”

Yet our forces forge on. And their spirit will be forever captured in a photograph that will become an icon of this war.

Perhaps you saw this picture in the news. Widely circulated in the media, it portrays a military doctor, sitting in the sand with a wounded Iraqi child in his lap.

The grief in the doctor's face clearly shows just what is in the hearts of our nation's soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines.

In his eyes, you can read the compassion that moves Americans to great sacrifice in places like Iraq and Afghanistan.

It is the same humanity that drove our military men and women in all of our past wars – in the World Wars, Korea, Vietnam, and the Persian Gulf.

It is the great power that moved their souls in the many smaller conflicts they've fought over the years – from Granada and Panama through Somalia and Liberia.

There are so many places around the world where our men and women have risked life and limb. Each time, they have responded with true greatness of heart.

Fueled by the deepest sense of patriotism, they have jumped into action. Kindled by the keenest commitment to human destiny, they have thrown caution to the wind.

This is the spirit we honor today as we observe Veterans Day. This spirit defines the greatness of America!

There's a reason why I began my remarks today with a story from Iraq. I worry about our youngest veterans. What will their future be?

Remember the two Iraqi guerillas I told you about earlier? We may think of them as cruel, heartless and callous. But let's look at what happens here in America.

This incident – which ended the life of one American soldier and forever changed the life of another – got its single story in the daily news.

But the dead soldier was reported only as a number: “One American was killed.” He was not given a name in the report.

The wounded soldier was also reduced to a statistic. We don't know his name ... or the nature of his injuries.

Perhaps this news was reported on page one in some of America's newspapers.

But in others, it appeared on page three or four. Still other papers left it out entirely, deeming it less newsworthy than a local car wreck or business merger.

Not much has changed since World War II, when Conrad Aiken wrote bitterly that, “Thousands die, die, and are not remembered overmuch.”

The dead soldier will have some sort of on-going “life” in the statistics. Reporters like to keep a running tab on the number of soldiers killed in any war. And I suppose this is a good thing ... in its own way.

The wounded aren't so lucky, however. They get a single day as a statistic, and then most are lost to history.

Once last summer, CNN demanded statistics on the wounded from the Pentagon. And that's just what they got: raw numbers.

The armed forces gave them only the number of troops wounded in combat, and the number injured in non-combat incidents.

There was no further information.

There was no clue about the nature of the injuries our troops have sustained. And there was no information about any

sicknesses that may be affecting our troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

There is danger in this – a very serious danger that our youngest disabled veterans are already being forgotten even as their wounds heal in our military and VA hospitals.

Please allow me a moment of privilege as a veteran of the United States armed forces. There is something I must say to my fellow countrymen and women.

America, please wake up!

These young people in Iraq and Afghanistan are your sons and daughters.

In East Asia and the Middle East, these spirited Americans stand in the defense of freedom. They are your grandchildren, your nieces and nephews.

Though they serve in places as far away as Africa and Latin America, they are mothers and fathers of children right here in the United States.

What they do is a sacrifice made for you and for me. And they sacrifice a great deal.

One would think that our country would respect that sacrifice. And, indeed, a great many people do.

For several years now, plans have moved ahead to create a distinct new memorial in Washington, D.C., to honor the service and sacrifice of all disabled veterans. The Disabled Veterans' LIFE Memorial Foundation was created to make the idea of a memorial become a reality.

A wonderful site for the memorial has been selected across from the Botanical Garden and within full view of the U. S. Capitol. And I am pleased to tell you that the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial is in the final stages.

But the real hard work of fund raising is still ahead in this effort to build a lasting tribute to all disabled veterans so that at last, their service and sacrifice will be appreciated in a memorial that millions of Americans will be able to see forever.

I certainly thank you for the honor you have given our nation's veterans by coming here today.

By your presence, you have rendered honor to all of our nation's veterans – from the time of the American Revolution to the current struggle against the worldwide threat of terror.

You've lifted your voice today. You've shown that you care.

But what about the many others who are not like you. What about those who see this national holiday as an excuse to drive to the mall and get a bargain at the big Veterans Day sale?

And what about the politicians who sent our young soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines off to carry the cause of freedom into the bloodiest corners of a very dangerous world?

What have they been doing even as our troops have been off fighting for freedom?

Please don't be shocked! But most of our politicians were trying to carve away at the veterans' programs our troops will need when they come home!

Disgusting as it may sound, this hypocrisy is actually the order of the day in Washington, D.C.

In the midst of all this, I remember a bright moment when one courageous voice called out for sanity among our nation's political leaders.

“An officer's word is his bond,” said Congressman Rob Simmons as the House of Representatives discussed how much it would spend on veterans in the 2004 Appropriations Bill.

He pointed out that our nation's politicians – in a time of war – had promised to support veterans' programs. But, when that spending became inconvenient, they turned their backs on veterans.

They had given their word, he said. But they had broken their promises.

When Congressman Simmons took his stand on the moral high ground, he did not have much company. But he was exactly right when he cited the great divide between words and deeds in the political world.

It's just too easy for political leaders to say all the *right* things in their Veterans Day speeches, and do all the *wrong* things behind closed doors in Washington.

This is the harsh reality we face in the world of veterans' affairs today. We cannot take *anything* for granted.

It shows why we have to stick together if we are *ever* going to protect veterans' benefits and programs today.

And this may be even more critical: we simply must build a solid front in defense of the future.

If we fail in that duty, who will protect our youngest disabled veterans who are coming home injured and sick from places like Iraq, Afghanistan, and Liberia?

When I look at the task ahead of us, I'm reminded of a poem called, "Of Being Numerous," by George Oppen. Recalling his life and times during World War II, Mr. Oppen writes:

I cannot even now
Altogether disengage myself
From those men

With whom I stood in emplacements, in mess tents,
In hospitals and sheds and hid in the gullies
Of blasted roads in a ruined country.

It's interesting that the moments that drew the poet nearest to his fellow GIs did *not* come in the heat of combat. The times he describes are the long hours of slog and grind that come as side effects of war.

But aren't these the hours when men and women at war form the bonds that hold them together?

As veterans, we need to renew that bond today, but within a larger and fuller community. Each of us has a real connection – a powerful linkage – with every other veteran in the United States.

And, if we know what is best for all of us, we'll listen to the poet, George Oppen. And we'll remain fully engaged with *all* of our fellow veterans.

As we strive to protect veterans' programs for ourselves and for the veterans of the future, we must maintain the strength and the unity of our connection with one another.

If we fail in that duty, we are lost.

And I quake to think of what *that* would mean to the men and women who come home bearing the scars of conflict in Iraq, Afghanistan, Korea, Liberia, and wherever else our government may send them.

Think of this, our youngest veterans are just nineteen and twenty years old. They will still need VA compensation and medical care in the years 2060 and 2070.

Yet, when these young soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines are in their 70s, 80s and 90s, will they form a very large part of the American population?

No, they won't. In the coming decades, the veterans of the large land wars of the 20th century will pass away.

As that happens, the percentage of veterans in the American population will drop off. Every year, it will become more difficult for veterans to defend their rights.

That's why we must do all we can today to build a platform from which our youngest veterans can launch their own tomorrow.

It is our responsibility to help them. It is our duty as their brothers and sisters.

Let us remain engaged. Let us build for today ... and for tomorrow.

Let us create a new America that will never forget the meaning of this observance – Veterans Day – a day of honor and dignity, respect and obligation.

Thank you.

