

**VETERANS DAY:
To Bring Freedom to the World**

11 November 2005



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

As he left for Europe during World War I, Private Lester Hensler wrote a brief letter to his mother saying, “I am thankful that I can take a place among men who will bring freedom to the world.”

Private Hensler was a simple man, an artillery soldier of humble rank. Yet, when you think about it, his ambition was simply colossal. This ordinary young American actually wanted to change the course of civilization.

What an idea: to alter the direction of the entire world!

Yet this astonishing drive to change the course of human events on a global scale is a hallmark of America's fighting men and women.

Ask them what they're doing in the Armed Forces, and they'll tell you they're fighting for freedom – your freedom ...my freedom ... the freedom of the whole world.

They don't think of this as some kind of noble dream. It's a practical reality for the men and women of America's Armed Forces – something they take for granted.

Their hearts are pure as they pursue this grand vision that they adopted as their daily duty. The cynical stain that taints the motives of the world's political capitals never touches their souls.

Our soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines stand with the people of America. They stand with the people of the *world* – especially those whose lives and freedoms are crushed beneath the iron-heeled boots of dictators.

That was true when Private Hensler went to fight in Europe during World War I. And it's absolutely true today as our troops fight in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Yet there's a problem in our times – a danger really – in the way our nation deals with the people who are fighting these two wars. It's what some people would call a mental dis-connect.

In a recent *Time Magazine* editorial, Joe Klein captured the core of the problem.

During dinner with Mr. Klein, a military officer just back from combat in Iraq said something very striking – something one American journalist felt the people of his country desperately needed to hear. Let me quote that officer:

“I lost five lieutenants in a year. I collected body parts. I don't know how I'll ever get over that.

“And you just get the feeling that the rest of the country doesn't understand. They're not part of this. It's peacetime America, and a few of us are at war.

(unquote)

As we gather here today, on Veterans Day, it's difficult to hear words like those from a soldier, recently home from the war our nation asked him to fight. But Mr. Klein was right to make his readers stop and hear from a combat veteran.

We might also do well to listen to Joe Klein's insights about his friend's comments. He has some sobering ideas about America's attitude toward the men and women who are fighting our wars:

“We have had a long season of sunshine patriotism in the U.S. since the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001,” wrote Mr. Klein.

“We love our troops without qualification, and rightly so. They have fought with courage and restraint in a horrifying chaos of battle ... But there is a growing sense that mere patriotic displays won't cut it anymore.”

Joe Klein's language may be a little stronger than the words we've used in the DAV and the other veterans' organizations. But we've been making the same point for a while now.

Some Americans are paying a horrible price in Iraq and Afghanistan, but the lives of most of our country's people are virtually untouched. That's where the dis-connect comes into play.

Here's how one young veteran described the dis-connect when he went back to college following a tour of duty in Iraq.

When he goes into a coffee shop on campus, he says he sometimes wants to shake people. He just wants to ask them: Don't you realize what's going on in this world?

This young veteran isn't talking about the uncomfortable stretch of mental distance that exists when any war veteran returns to civilian society. That distance will always be there. Nothing can change that.

This young man was talking about something far beyond the normal distancing a veteran feels upon coming home from war.

His insight into American society upon entering the campus coffee shop is very real. The lack of connection between the students and the war is very thorough.

Can you remember a period of war that has asked so little of the American people?

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan ask almost nothing of the kids in the coffee shop ... or of our society as a whole.

Only a small percentage of American families have members in the Armed Forces. For them, the wars are a constant source of worry. For two thousand families, these wars have cost the lives of dearly loved children, parents, brothers and sisters.

But for just about every other American family, it's been a far different experience. War has been something that happens on television. After the news broadcast, life goes on as it would in a time of peace.

No one planned things to be this way. It just happened.

And the students in the coffee shop are good kids, I'm sure. If they knew our young friend was a veteran, they'd try their best to welcome him with open arms. That would help, believe me. But still, the war would not touch them personally.

And so the dis-connect continues.

Again this year, Americans will celebrate Veterans Day with gigantic retail sales. Our citizens will flock to the malls rather than ceremonies like this or VA hospitals where our wounded warriors wait to be welcomed home.

This is a problem of thoughtlessness, not malice. As Joe Klein pointed out, the American people love their troops – and their veterans.

Opinion research proves this.

If Americans are divided over the war in Iraq, they're nearly unanimous in support of veterans. A recent poll showed them supporting veterans' programs at an astonishing 95 percent.

Americans understand Private Hensler, the World War I soldier I mentioned at the beginning of my remarks. They understand the purity in his heart ... and the hearts of all the generations of veterans who followed him.

They want the Private Henslers of this world to be treated well when they come home from defending the cause of freedom.

Our political leaders, however, seem to be caught in the disconnect. While they're good at what Joe Klein calls "mere patriotic displays," their words are not backed by action.

In the interest of our nation's veterans, we must not mince words about this: At one and the same time, our government is conducting two wars abroad and shortchanging veterans' programs at home. This is hypocrisy.

Our leaders made a promise to veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, saying they'll give them only the best. But they placed a two-year limit on that promise.

When their time is up, these veterans go into the general pool of those disabled in the World Wars, Korea, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf, and the numerous armed conflicts we've seen over the years.

And it's not always wonderful when those two years come to an end.

Don't get me wrong, the medical treatment offered by the Department of Veterans Affairs is second to none. Over a period of decades, however, Congress has not provided enough money to fully fund the VA.

The results of all the corner-cutting are telling now, as the VA confronts the burden of two unexpected wars. The foundations of those corners have been carved away, and they're crumbling.

So what faces our youngest, most vulnerable veterans? The same problems the rest of us face:

- Health care is rationed with schemes like spacing doctor's appointments further and further apart.

- Despite what the public is led to believe, the vast bulk of America's veterans are excluded from VA health care altogether.
- Hospitals are run on bare-bones staffing during endless hiring freezes.
- Though things have improved somewhat, veterans still wait far too long for disability claims to be processed.

The list goes on and on. Believe me, this is not what America wants for the men and women fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. This is not what our nation's people want for any of their beloved veterans.

This Veterans Day, I ask Congress and the White House to face reality: If you go to war, you have to face the costs of war – **ALL OF THE COSTS OF WAR.**

Some of those costs – borne by the men and women our nation asked to do the fighting – persist for decades after the guns of war fall silent.

Here are some of those costs:

- Men and women in uniform are wounded as a result of direct enemy action. That's obvious, but it doesn't end there.
- Others are injured in the extremely hazardous circumstances of military service, especially as they exist in war zones.
- Few things stress the human mind as severely as war; no compassionate society can turn its back on those who come home with psychological wounds.
- As anyone who has read Homer's *Iliad* or yesterday's news should know, illness has always been a significant factor in war. This is still true today, especially in Iraq and Afghanistan.
- People are widowed and children are orphaned when a service member is killed or a veteran dies due to a service-connected disability.

America has a clear responsibility to the men and women who bear these costs of war.

Our government cannot walk away from these costs when they become inconvenient or someone has other priorities in mind.

If you ask our political leaders about this, they'll point to slight increases in the dollar-amounts budgeted for the VA and pat themselves on the back.

But small-dollar budget increases have never kept pace in a very long era of double-digit growth in health care costs. In terms of real need, the budget for veterans' programs has consistently fallen behind year after year.

This is not a recent development. It's been going on since the end of the Vietnam War.

The dis-connect has to end.

It evades the responsibility of the United States to the men and women our nation asks to defend our freedom and our shores. It fails to match the expectations of the American public. It falls short of our moral vision of ourselves as a people.

The dis-connect has to end.

We veterans like the patriotic displays that Joe Klein talked about. We want to see the President lay a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknowns on patriotic holidays. On Veterans Day, it's good to hear political leaders recognize what we did for our country.

However, we don't want these events to descend into mere patriotic displays.

That is why, today, I ask our nation's leaders to remember that programs are the proof of their patriotic sentiments – programs, not words.

Nothing less than adequate programs will be good enough for the men and women who, in the words of Private Lester Hensler, placed their lives on the line to “take a place among men who will bring freedom to the world.”

Thank you.