

**VETERANS DAY:  
Offering the Highest Appreciation**

**11 November 2006**



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

John F. Kennedy knew the destruction that war brings to human life. He experienced combat as a young naval officer aboard PT-109.

He was one of many World War II veterans who made their mark in history.

Who can forget the challenge President Kennedy put before our citizens: “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.”

With those words, he revealed the spiritual depth of the people we’ve come to know as the “Greatest Generation.”

For them, duty, morality, and high-minded principles came first.

And when World War II veterans were elected to public office, their fellow veterans counted on them to see that our nation did its duty by those who served honorably and well.

After he was elected President, Jack Kennedy once again stated what was in the heart of the great American people.

“As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, *but to live them.*”

And President Kennedy was absolutely right – especially in caring for those who sacrificed years of their lives in the cause of American liberty!

By coming to this ceremony today, you have taken your stand on the side of meaning and action. You have stepped forward to show that you fully understand that your freedom was purchased at a terrible price.

Some of you have paid that price yourselves. You paid it by putting on the uniforms of our nation's armed forces and giving up years of your lives in the pursuit of our nation's defining principles.

You did not complain. You offered yourself for duty.

You may have served stateside, but you would have gone into combat at a word.

Or you may have confronted the beast of war face-to-face.

You did your duty, my brothers and sisters. And on Veterans Day, I salute you.

This is your day. The honor and the tributes of this moment are yours.

Some of you gave even more. You returned from service disabled.

The cost of war was written in your scars, both physical and mental. Permanent injuries and illnesses still haunt you, years after you took off your uniforms.

Your wars will go on until the day you die.

As a member and representative of the Disabled American Veterans, I too know that the impact of your military service is with you always.

You go to bed with it at night, and wake up with it in the morning. It follows you throughout your day.

And for your sacrifice, you deserve the appreciation of a grateful nation. And soon we'll see those thanks eternalized in Washington, D.C., with construction of the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial.

Also with us today are members of veterans' families. We love you. We appreciate you. We know that sometimes war comes back to haunt a veteran. And we veterans understand and appreciate the burden you also carry.

Finally, I offer my deep affection to those who are not veterans themselves, or members of veterans' families – to you who came here only to show your appreciation for those who served our nation.

Truly, you are doing what President Kennedy asked.

You aren't just uttering words. You're living out the meaning of what you feel in your heart.

In coming here today, you made a decision very different from most of our fellow citizens. I thank you deeply for keeping the meaning of Veterans Day.

But not everyone shares those sentiments, and some of those who do not have found their way into elected office. Surely, I'm not talking about all of our elected leaders, but a commentary in a national news outlet recently brought the problem into focus.

Talking of how Congress proposed to slash funding for research and treatment of traumatic brain injuries among our Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, it bluntly stated:

“It's hard to imagine a story that more clearly illustrates that ‘support the troops’ means support the lawmakers who send other people's kids off to get mangled” in war.

Traumatic brain injury is devastating. Few wounds change the life of a veteran more completely.

And these horrifying wounds turn up in our military and veterans hospitals again and again and again!

They often are the result of roadside bombs and other explosive devices favored by insurgents and terrorists.

The blasts from these bombs do more than rip off arms and legs. They damage more than faces, internal organs, and spinal cords.

They destroy whole sections of the brains of young Americans in battle.

So what did Congress do just last summer? They saved \$7 million by dropping funding for the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center.

The response from the veterans' community was immediate and harsh.

- A VFW news release said Congress was completely out of touch with the realities of the wars it asked our troops to fight.

- A national spokesman for the Disabled American Veterans said this Congressional action was “darn near criminal.”

Those are just two examples. But a spokeswoman for the Senate Appropriations Committee offered a bland explanation:

“Honestly,” she said, “they would have loved to have funded it, but there were just so many priorities.”

My heart breaks to hear such thoughtless nonsense:

- How many priorities outweigh the needs of the most severely wounded veterans coming home from combat overseas?
- How many priorities are more important than our youngest, most vulnerable disabled veterans?

The priorities that ruled the day in this instance are the fruit of an age that has lost touch with the values of John F. Kennedy’s day.

I'm not going to list all the so-called "benchmarks" that were judged to be more important than war-wounded veterans with traumatic brain injuries.

Go to the Internet or pick up any newspaper. You'll find plenty of examples of pork-barrel projects and special interests that trumped bleeding American kids in uniform.

I just want to ask why our elected leaders don't seem to feel any sense of obligation to these brave, young Americans who have been sent off to war.

Do they think they can fight wars on the cheap – the only costs being weapons and logistics? Do they think they should get off the hook when our young people come home bleeding, broken and sick?

You may be asking yourself how this could happen when Congress is forced to face the issues of war and peace every day.

Fair question. And maybe the editorial I cited at the beginning of my remarks offers at least part of an answer.

This is a time very different from the days when Jack Kennedy was President and the halls of Congress were filled with veterans.

Few in Congress today ever served in the armed forces. The number of veterans in Congress grows smaller all the time.

And almost none of these elected leaders has a son or daughter serving in the armed forces. As that editorial said, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are being waged by “other people’s kids.”

Truly, I doubt that a staff member from a Senate committee would talk about “so many other priorities” if her boss had a daughter or a son in the streets of Baghdad or Kabul!

It pains me to say this, but the troubles veterans face today are the same problems they’ve confronted for decades.

Still today, after years of promises, a disabled veteran can wait years to see a claim for benefits go through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Think of this: World War II and Korean War veterans are still dying as they wait for someone to look at their claims and make a decision.

This didn't happen because people reduced the size of the federal government. Today's government is larger than it has ever been.

The reduction took place in VA services to men and women who protected that government.

Now to the next problem: Harvard University rates VA hospital care higher than that provided in private sector hospitals, but access to that care can be very difficult.

For years, funding cuts have forced the VA to make veterans wait for appointments. Let me make my point more clearly: The VA must ration medical treatment for the men and women who fought our nation's wars.

While our youngest veterans are getting the best prosthetic and orthotic devices today, what's their future? What happens when the wars are over and the heat is off the politicians?

Will these young heroes lose the priority they have today?

I hate to say it, but I strongly suspect they will. My statement is backed by history – what has actually happened after every war our nation has ever fought.

It may shock you, but that goes all the way back to the period following the American Revolution – a time that saw war-wounded veterans begging in the streets of Boston.

I say this to all the politicians who stand up to praise our nation's heroes on Veterans Day this year: I ask you to return to the spirit of the days of John F. Kennedy: "The highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them."

This is what I ask of our nation's leaders:

If you're going to speak of the courage and the honor of America's veterans ... if you're going to cite our nation's debt to those who defended freedom ... then live by your words!

We veterans and our friends can no longer be seduced by shining speeches on patriotic holidays. We must understand reality.

Talk is very inexpensive, while living up to duty can be costly indeed.

All of us who are veterans know the cost of duty. We lived up to our duty at a high personal price: years of our lives, our blood, our health, opportunities that were lost to others while we served our country.

We did not dodge that heavy price. We did not talk of other priorities in our lives. We did our duty, and we did not look back.

Now when veterans need their government, our nation's leaders should do their duty.

No one – absolutely no one – should speak of other priorities that rank higher than our nation's most severely disabled veterans. Such talk betrays the blood of heroes.

In closing, I thank you once again for coming here today ... for sharing our Veterans Day observance ... for opening your heart to those of us who served.

America is its people, and you are the greatness of America.  
You are the tower of our national honor. You are the pillar of  
our moral strength.

You are the people of the greatest nation the world has ever  
known.

Thank you, and God bless America.

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