

# **Veterans Day: Giving Meaning to the Words**



## **Suggested Remarks for DAV Speakers At Observances of Veterans Day, 2007**

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

Let me begin these Veterans Day remarks by talking about just one veteran.

His story is a little disturbing. But it says something about the meaning of this national holiday in American culture today, during a time of war. So please bear with me for a while.

Not long ago, a newspaper in a Midwestern city wrote about a young soldier who suffered a serious brain injury in Iraq.

The Department of Veterans Affairs had already diagnosed the wound. In addition to the injury to the brain, VA doctors also found combat-related stress and deafness in one ear.

But the young soldier was receiving no benefits from the government.

Things might have been a little easier if he was still married and his wife was bringing home a paycheck. But during his last combat tour in Iraq, his marriage went on the rocks. It ended shortly after he came home, a severely disabled veteran.

So there was no help there as the months passed, and he waited for the VA to finish processing his claim for benefits he earned by fighting for our country.

This young man needed the money. He couldn't work. Bills were piling up.

He couldn't pay his utilities. He lost his water service. Electricity would go next.

Rent was becoming a problem. Fear of homelessness was taking hold.

For food, he had to depend on loans from his family ... and local charities.

This young man came home from Iraq with several medals. By our usual definitions in America, he's a hero. Imagine how he felt, going to a food pantry to ask for help.

We cannot solve every problem in this veteran's life. We cannot put his marriage back together, for example. And there's only so much the VA can do to repair the damage to his brain, his hearing, and his spirit.

But I believe this much is obvious: America owes its heroes something far better than the indignities that came down the path for this young Iraq war veteran.

I'd like to tell you this story is unusual ... that this is just one person who, somehow, slipped through the cracks.

But this story represents day-to-day reality in the world of veterans' affairs – for troops coming home disabled from Iraq and Afghanistan, for all of America's veterans.

We need to put some meaning behind the phrase, "Support Our Troops."

But here's a piece of irony.

On the same day that this story appeared in a Midwestern newspaper, two of our elected leaders had a loud argument about military policy on the floor of Congress.

Though the point they were shouting at each other about was a little obscure, it basically came down to this:

One wanted to bring the troops home from Iraq as soon as possible. The other wanted to build up the number of troops in that country.

And both supported their arguments with the phrase, "Support Our Troops."

Since the first troops left for Afghanistan, people of every political stripe have talked about supporting our troops in making their own political points about the wars.

And it didn't seem to matter if those points had anything at all to do with the actual well-being of troops in the field or veterans of our wars.

Perhaps these elected leaders are sincere, but here's the truth: They used the idea of supporting the troops as a pawn in their own political chess games. And this really should stop.

As events like the scandal at Walter Reed Army Medical Center this past year have shown, we absolutely must look at what it really means to "Support Our Troops."

It certainly doesn't mean supporting our favorite politician. Supporting the troops means exactly what the phrase says – supporting the troops, *themselves*.

It means making sure our men and women in uniform have what they need while they're serving our country in uniform ... and when they come home.

And this support is particularly critical for those who leave the armed forces sick and wounded, permanently disabled.

Supporting our troops means understanding that a soldier, who lost an arm in Afghanistan in 2003, is not different from someone who lost an arm in 1943 during World War II.

That arm is never going to grow back.

Today's 20-year-old veteran will still need our nation's help in the year 2067, when he's the same age as our World War II veterans.

Supporting our troops means being there today ... and sixty years from now. It means our government must make a serious, meaningful, long-term commitment to the men and women it asked to defend our country.

In the end, meeting that obligation is part of the cost of war.

The fact that our nation's leaders thought little about that question when they were debating the invasion of Iraq doesn't change the nature of the debt to veterans of that or any war.

The young veteran whose story I just told has a right to expect dignity and justice from the country he served – not just pious words on Veterans Day.

And as we observe this national holiday, I report to you that our nation's debt to its youngest generation of veterans is growing rapidly.

The VA reports that more than a quarter of a million veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have turned up at its clinics and hospitals, seeking treatment.

You might be shocked to learn that one out of every four veterans of these wars has filed a claim for VA benefits.

These numbers sound extremely high. But should we be surprised?

Think about this: We're now sending our troops back into Iraq and Afghanistan for their third and fourth tours of combat duty.

Today's combat tour in the Army is 15 months long.

There is no opportunity to return to the rear in Iraq and Afghanistan, to take a break from combat. There is no rear in either of these countries. Both are filled with insurgents and terrorists.

And it's a matter of odds. How often can you go back ... how long can you stay ... before your luck runs out?

As a veteran, I salute the men and women who are fighting today's wars. Military service has become very different than it's ever been before. It not only requires great courage, it demands incredible endurance.

And on this Veterans Day, I ask our politicians to rise to give real meaning to the phrase, "Support Our Troops!"

Let's go back to our veteran in the Midwest, the young hero living in squalor while waiting for our country to recognize, with benefits, the three devastating disabilities he suffered in Iraq.

As I said, this story is not unique. Nor is it anything that developed just since the start of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

For decades now, disabled veterans have been waiting months – often years – for claims to move through the VA. I believe most of the people in the VA are doing all they can.

The problem is Congress, the White House, and funding.



One must remember that veterans' disabilities don't get better with age. More often they grow worse, and they cause other things to go wrong in the bodies of our veterans.

Things began to reach a crisis point about a decade and a half ago.

Veterans of World War II began to die while waiting for the VA to resolve their claims. The aging of our Korean War veterans only created greater worry.

This was a huge dishonor to the veterans. Often, it caused a terrible wrong to their widowed spouses.

For a while, it looked as if things might get better. But that didn't last.

Improvements were slight. And the realities of today's wars caused a huge influx of new claims for VA benefits. The crisis in the VA claims system is back ... and as bad as ever.

This Veterans Day, our elected leaders can only support the troops by putting their words into action.

Specifically, Congress must provide money to beef up the VA claims process. Then it must make sure the Administration hires and trains the people it takes to get the job done.

Next let me talk about the crisis in medical care for veterans. Here again, the problems were serious before the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Each year since the end of the Vietnam War, Congress boasted about increasing the budget for VA health care.

But these so-called increases never kept pace with inflation. And they failed to track the real needs of an aging population of veterans.

Then came Iraq and Afghanistan. In the rush to war, people believed America's vast power would achieve easy victories. In no time, the troops would be home. The casualties would be few.

It didn't work out that way, but I don't want to point fingers. I want to focus the future on a solution.

With a quarter million new Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans as patients in the VA medical system, there's no time to look backward.

More veterans from these wars will turn to the VA in the years ahead. We must address a future that includes a new generation of veterans, the size of which we cannot now predict.

Veterans of every wartime period have their own unique problems, and that's certainly true of our youngest generation. These men and women have a host of new issues specific to them.

And our nation must remember that it will not solve all the medical issues in just a few years and walk away from this generation of veterans.

That's not the way it works. A disabled veteran's battles do not end when the guns of war fall silent. A soldier disabled on the streets of Ramadi or Kabul today will be disabled for life.

That's why I say that a focus on the future – on solutions – is so crucial right now.

And the solution is to take funding of the VA medical system out of the political free-for-all that is the federal budget process.

At this point in history – a time of war – all of us can easily see that medical care for veterans is one of America’s highest priorities.

But in the current budget process, veterans must compete with every other pet project that anyone brings to Congress, regardless of merit.

This needs to stop. And it *will* stop when Congress passes legislation to provide *mandatory* funding to the VA medical system.

The meaning of mandatory funding is simple.

It means that funding of VA hospitals, clinics and nursing homes will be based on what America’s veterans actually need – not on some arbitrary number that surfaces from somewhere in the depths of political posturing.

Let me urge you to go home today and write letters to your Congressional Representatives, and your Senators. To make your point more potent, date your letters Veterans Day 2007.

Ask your elected leaders to support mandatory funding of the VA medical system.

Nothing could be more important to veterans coming home sick and wounded from Iraq and Afghanistan. Nothing could be more critical to all of our disabled veterans.

It was President Harry Truman who said, “Any provision that will assist those veterans who have suffered the most severe disabilities as a result of their service commands, and should command, our most sympathetic consideration.”

At a time when the VA is forced to ration care to disabled veterans, mandatory funding certainly fits Harry Truman’s definition.

This is legislation our veterans need. And the need is particularly intense today as young Americans fight and bleed for our country.

It has been a great honor to speak to you today, sharing something about the issues that confront our nation's veterans.

And thank you for observing Veterans Day. It's very important that you're here. You may not realize it, but you're making a statement of cultural significance.

If you opened this morning's newspaper, I'm sure you noticed that many retail stores used Veterans Day as an excuse to have sales – to turn this important national holiday into a great big shopping spree.

What a mockery of the meaning of Veterans Day, especially in a time of war!

That's why I am particularly grateful that you made a different decision today – that you chose to be here, observing this day with the Disabled American Veterans and the other veterans organizations.

Thank you.