

# A War Against Indifference

VETERANS DAY

11 November 2010

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

Ladies and gentleman, thanks to each and every one of you for passing up the department store sales to celebrate the service and sacrifice of our nation's veterans.

It's a strange and perhaps shocking thing to say, but I believe it's a fair statement given America's aversion to inconvenience and willingness to forget the importance of military service even as we supposedly remain a nation at war.

I say “supposedly” because the question lingers: Are we a “nation” at war? It certainly doesn’t seem like it. We hear the label “warrior” applied to a pitcher who hurls a no-hitter and the term “hero” used to describe trapped miners.

Where does this leave our actual heroes? What about our men and women in harm’s way? I’m not sure because they are so rarely discussed these days.

This is due in part to the fact that such a small percentage of our nation serves or has ever served in uniform. This is not a value judgment, just a realistic observation.

And, unfortunately, as a nation, we possess an ability to collectively turn a blind eye to the military and veterans communities except on Veterans Day, Memorial Day and the 24-hour news cycle following a Wikileaks scandal.

And I think we are less for this forgetfulness.

These thoughts bring to mind the dark days following the terror attacks of 9/11. Stunned and bloodied by those horrific acts of terrorism, we briefly turned away from the distraction of movies, sporting events and stock portfolios to assess what was truly important.

A common thread we saw woven through countless stories in 2002 was of combat veterans of previous eras—especially Vietnam—reaching out with fervor and determination to young service men and women returning from Afghanistan.

If I were to offer a fair summary of countless quotes in television, radio and print pieces during those incredibly patriotic first years of what was being called a “War on Terror,” it would go something like this:

“I will do everything I can to make sure these heroes get the ‘welcome home’ so many didn’t get 25 and 30 years ago.”

Men and women of every political stripe bonded together to support our troops, especially those suffering wounds as a consequence of their service.

During the war in Vietnam, we had failed to separate our feelings for the war from the warrior summoned to fight it. We promised ourselves it would not happen again...but I'm sad to say that it is happening again now.

We have just replaced anger with indifference.

The recent announcement of the end of combat operations in Iraq signaled a virtual media blackout for coverage in that country even as our brave men and women in uniform continue to fight, become injured and die there.

Afghanistan is now America's longest war. The "Support Our Troops" and "Remember 9-11" bumper stickers are fading after nearly a decade of combat in that distant, ancient land. And as the stickers fade so does our

collective interest in what our men and women in uniform are enduring on our behalf.

The intensity of the fighting there is increasing and casualties continue to escalate.

But here on the home front, we are concerned mostly about economic growth and unemployment. Which is why I scratch my head when I think about how little discussion there is of the unemployment rate for veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, which tripled from 2007 to 2010.

As the nation suffers through unemployment approaching 10 percent, more than 15 percent of these young veterans found themselves out of work as of March of this year according to the US Labor Department.

We talk about a national malaise prompted by economic woes. But we hear so little of the malaise and combat fatigue that prompts 30 US veterans to attempt suicide every day.

All on its own, the Army, with at least 125 suicides so far this year, is tragically on pace to break last year's all-time high of 162 suicides.

What's more, a recent study of California veterans between the ages of 18 and 25 found that these young men and women are not only two and a half times more likely to commit suicide than civilians of the same age, they are twice as likely to die in a car accident and five and a half times more likely to be killed on a motorcycle.

Homeless shelters are reporting an influx of young veterans, and substance abuse continues to claim the lives and livelihoods only recently marked by the peak physical prowess of military service.

With three, four and five tours or more in Iraq and Afghanistan a common experience for many active duty, guard and reserve service members, it should come as no surprise that so many have discovered their breaking point.

But how would we know this? The war is out of sight, out of mind. A nation seemingly obsessed with convenience, we can conveniently shrug off any thoughts of the sacrifices made on our behalf.

As heartbreaking as it is to say, it sometimes feels as if we live less and less in the world that our parents, grandparents and more distant ancestors created for us.

But this IS the same nation and I believe it is time we started acting like it.

That you are here today tells me that you are part of a minority of American citizens who love, support and appreciate our veterans enough to take a hard look at the often harsh realities we face.

You understand that on Veterans Day we honor the men and women whose service and sacrifices have preserved the liberty we enjoy. You know this is more than just a day off work a few weeks before Thanksgiving.

I'm honored to speak to men and women who understand the important work of the DAV. Through our constant struggle for the honor, respect and support due to disabled veterans of all wars, we work to foster a national culture of respect for each and every man and woman who has served.

The DAV has been serving veterans for more than 90 years. In this time, we have learned some very important lessons about how fickle support for veterans can be.

Our charge, as we gather here today, is to commit ourselves to making a brighter future for the men and women who've given so much to make our way of life possible.

We need to honor that promise of nearly a decade ago—never again! We must vow to lift our veterans into the light and struggle against the indifference and neglect that is once again beginning to show among the public and our political leaders.

From the bottom of my heart, I thank you for remembering our veterans and all they have done to make America great.

May God bless each and every one of you who strive against indifference. May God bless and protect our men and women in harm's way, and my God bless our veterans who've kept our country free!

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