

Suggested Remarks for

Memorial Day 2014

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

It's an honor and a pleasure to be here with you all today as we come together in remembrance of and in tribute to some of our nation's finest and bravest.

There's always a conversation that picks up in our schools, our workplaces and our communities prior to our military and veteran centered holidays such as Memorial Day. People ask, "How can we best honor and remember our nation's veterans and those who have fallen in service to our country?"

We can and should talk about heroism and sacrifice, and if you flip through our nation's history books you will be inundated with accounts of bravery that still resonate deep within us decades later. We are humbled by the tremendous courage shown by our brave sailors, soldiers, airmen, Marines and Coast Guardsmen throughout our history. There is no doubt that our veterans have paved the way for our military's reputation as the finest fighting force in the world – both in strength and in character. That's why it's important – in fact imperative – that we remember them always.

Almost 150 years ago, President Abraham Lincoln stood before a war-weary nation and uttered the most famous words ever said about veterans. Lincoln spoke of the sacred obligation of our nation to “...care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan.” Those words are inscribed on the entrance above the Department of Veterans Affairs in our nation’s capital and spoken at almost every Memorial Day or Veterans Day event.

But we know that honoring our veterans with words alone falls terribly short if we do not bring those words to life by honoring them equally with deeds worthy of their sacrifice. When we all walk away from this place in a few hours, when the weekend is over and all the flags come down off the lampposts, we need to ask ourselves, what more can we do to honor their legacy? How can we give them something more than a ceremony and a moment's gratitude?

For some, particularly our Vietnam-era veterans, honor and respect for their deeds may be all they ask, and so public ceremonies providing recognition of their service are essential. But we have both the power and the obligation to do more for our veterans and for their families and survivors.

We must keep all of our promises to the men and women who have served. When they swore an oath to “...support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies...” they made a commitment to all of us. And at the same time, we, as a nation, incurred a sacred obligation to them upon their return home: to heal their wounds, to rebuild their lives and to care for their survivors. Over the years, our government has worked to fulfill that promise by providing health care, compensation, transition services and other benefits to meet their changing needs.

However, time and again, especially in recent years, we have seen how partisan bickering and political gridlock have threatened the ability of the Department of Veterans Affairs to meet the needs of our nation's heroes. The failure of Congress and Presidents to assure sufficient, timely and predictable funding has and will continue to hamper the VA and threaten our promises. As we saw this past October, these partisan battles occasionally reach a stalemate that can even halt the federal government in its tracks.

That's why DAV and other veterans' organizations worked so hard in 2009 to get Congress to pass, and the President to sign, legislation to provide advance funding for veterans' health care programs. As a result of that law, VA hospitals and clinics were able to remain open and provide medical care to veterans, even during the shutdown.

While that law has been a tremendous success for health care, it doesn't cover all of VA's budget. There are still important parts of the VA that are threatened when political stalemates block the budget. As demonstrated during the shutdown, the VA could not process new disability claims, and many critical services were hampered. If the shutdown had continued just a few weeks longer, the VA would not have been able to make mandatory benefits payments to disabled veterans, student veterans and survivors.

This must never happen again. The men and women who put their lives on the line should never have to worry about whether they will receive their earned benefits.

That's why DAV and other veterans' organizations are working together to get Congress to pass new legislation to protect the rest of VA's budget through advance funding. It's why we brought this message to Capitol Hill earlier this year during Operation: Keep the Promise. And it's why we've engaged millions of Americans in this conversation through Facebook, Twitter and other social media.

It's a conversation that needs to happen in communities across the country. Every voter in America has a voice, and each voice can play a part in letting Congress know they need to take better care of our veterans and their families, and that we expect that their words will be matched by deeds.

On this solemn day, we must recommit ourselves to standing up for veterans. We must never stop fighting for veterans. They never stopped fighting for us, sacrificing for us, and so many gave their last dying breath for us. It is up to us now to honor those still with us, and the survivors of those who have passed, by fulfilling the nation's promise to our protectors – our military veterans.