

Suggested Remarks for

Memorial Day 2015

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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 to be here with you today as we come together to remember and to honor the service and sacrifice of our nation's finest and bravest.

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

We find ourselves here on this day, gathered together to reflect on this one sentiment, uttered many years ago by President John F. Kennedy.

Words, he believed, were useless unaccompanied by action.

This is why we – the many – gather here to honor our veterans – the few who were so willing to give of themselves to defend their brothers and their country.

It is a small fraction of our population charged with keeping us safe, with keeping our liberties intact.

So how do we properly thank this fragment of the population who has done so much to keep this country, our prosperity and freedoms intact?

It's interesting how different generations of veterans respond to being thanked for their service. Our World War II veterans generally seem to receive it politely – stoically – knowing that they had simply fulfilled their patriotic duty by fighting abroad.

Korean and Vietnam War veterans, too often overlooked, seem genuinely touched when welcomed home and remembered.

For our most recent generation of veterans, who represent an even smaller percentage of the population than in previous wars, the gratitude is accepted but many feel a sense of disconnect from their civilian peers.

What is common throughout all generations of veterans, however, is the absolute insistence that the gratitude truly belongs – not to them – but to their fallen brothers and sisters who paid the ultimate sacrifice for this country.

This leads me to believe that the best way to thank them is to honor their fallen, to care for their wounded brothers and sisters, and to safeguard their families.

Warriors are selfless creatures. They fight as a team and as a family, and they look out for one another to their last dying breaths. Trust me when I say that there is no better way to thank a veteran than to protect their brethren.

This has been the DAV mission for nearly a century. We are proud to continue this mission today.

I'd like to share with you a story about a veteran near and dear to DAV. A man named Alan who we honored just weeks ago at the 29th annual DAV and VA cosponsored National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic in Colorado.

Back in 2003, as a 22-year-old Army medic of the 82nd Airborne, Alan's platoon came under attack in Iraq. He watched a fellow soldier go down in the line of fire.

Without pause, without hesitation, without thinking of himself or his own safety, Alan sprinted to his wounded brother, only to be shot himself.

The bullet entered his torso, ripping a massive hole through his stomach and tearing several vital organs. This was early in the war in the midst of an intense firefight. He lay clinging to life for three hours until it was safe enough for members of his platoon to medically evacuate him.

A few weeks later while he lied in a hospital bed at the former Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Alan contracted meningitis and suffered a massive, debilitating stroke.

He was paralyzed, unable to communicate, and completely dependent on others for care. All that, with so much life ahead of him.

After more than 70 operations, including five brain surgeries, Alan's family hesitantly brought him to this rehabilitative event in Aspen, Colorado.

It turned out to be a life-changing event for the entire family.

For years he's returned annually to the event and – in spite of the challenges he's faced in his recovery – he is now on the verge of becoming an independent sled skier. His coach, his parents and all those who have watched him progress say his road to recovery has been nothing short of an absolute miracle.

Now 34-years-old, Alan would tell you he was just doing his job on the day he was wounded back in 2003. He's no hero, he would say.

For that matter, I'm not sure I have ever heard a veteran or service member call him or herself a hero.

I'm sure we all beg to differ.

The wounds that used to claim lives on the battlefield are now being treated, and instead are becoming a lasting part of life for so many who return home.

The men and women who have sustained serious illness or injury as part of their military service are fighting their own fights right now.

In a sense, veterans like Alan who were so profoundly injured have given one life for their country. Yet, they would do so again. As would our fallen brothers and sisters who gave the last measure of devotion.

It's daunting, I know. When we think of the tremendous sacrifices survivors and veterans have made, physically and emotionally...how can we possibly say thanks?

What could possibly be good enough to say to Alan or our many other true heroes that would convey how truly grateful we are someone like them had the courage to do what so many others could not and would not.

For those who never left the battlefields, we must hold them up in our hometowns and honor their memories.

We should spend today reflecting on their service and sacrifice, and live in gratitude each and every day for the precious gift they have given to us.

As a nation, we made a promise – a promise that must be kept. To honor our fallen, we must keep that promise.

One way we are able to do that is by providing reinforcement for those, like Alan, who came home to us.

We keep those promises by strengthening the programs and services that our injured and ill veterans rely on. We must ensure they and their caregivers are properly supported.

We thank our veterans by fighting for them when they can't. By ensuring they and their survivors get the care they earned when they wrote a blank check "up to, and including their very lives."

Thank you, and may God bless and keep our fallen, our veterans and active military, and the United States of America.

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