



National Convention Remarks

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National Commander Metcalf-Foster, National Adjutant Burgess, distinguished guests and delegates to the 97th DAV and Auxiliary National Convention:

As Executive Director of DAV's National Service and Legislative Headquarters in Washington, DC, I am honored to provide my annual report on DAV's progress and accomplishments in providing service and promoting better public policies to support ill and injured veterans, their families and survivors.

Let me begin by thanking DAV Commander Metcalf-Foster and Adjutant Burgess for providing unflinching leadership, support and encouragement so critical to the many victories for veterans we have been able to achieve in recent years.

I also want to thank DAV Auxiliary National Commander Craig Johniken and National Adjutant Pat Kemper for standing right alongside us as we fight to honor and support the men and women who served.

Most importantly, I want to thank all of Team DAV—from our dedicated staffs in Washington and Cold Spring, to the more than 1 million members, family, friends and supporters across the country, including all of you here today. Without your efforts, none of our successes would be possible.

So please, give yourselves a well-earned round of applause.

As I was preparing for this year's convention—and reflecting back on my time in DC—I realized that since becoming the executive director of our Washington Headquarters five years ago, I've worked with seven different VA Secretaries—three permanent and four acting.

And there have been almost as many leadership changes on the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees, not to mention at other VSOs.

But regardless of who sits in those seats or fills those roles, our job remains constant—to promote the interests of ill and injured veterans—regardless of political turmoil in DC. It's not about the person, but our critical mission.

This reminds me of the words of one of our founding fathers, John Adams, who reflecting upon the leaders of his day said:

“In my many years I have come to a conclusion that one useless man is a shame, two is a law firm and three or more is a Congress.”

But the key to dealing with Congress is to understand not just the people, but also how the politics works.

In addition to Adams, I've found words of wisdom from some unlikely sources, such as Marx's theory of politics, Groucho Marx that is, who said:

"Politics is the art of looking for trouble, finding it everywhere, diagnosing it incorrectly and applying the wrong remedies."

But seriously, I think that my favorite Marx—our founder Judge Robert Marx—would agree that our job is to get Congress, VA and the Administration to focus on the right problems and adopt the right solutions, no matter who's in charge.

So even as Washington's political battles rage, I am pleased to report that over the past year we've made significant progress on DAV's critical priorities, most recently a historic victory for veteran caregivers, America's Unsung Heroes.

While we celebrate this historic victory, we know there are still some veterans and caregivers who are NOT eligible because the law doesn't include illnesses.

Rest assured, we have not forgotten you.

DAV will continue our fight to ensure that ALL of America's Unsung Heroes are fully covered.

But the VA MISSION Act contained more than just the caregiver victory—it is the culmination of years of work to ensure that the VA health care system is modernized, strengthened and sustained for future generations.

DAV and other VSOs worked closely with the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees, to promote our vision for improving veterans health care and fight back radical proposals to downsize or even dismantle VA in the name of unfettered Choice.

Now there has always been—and always will be—a need to use private community providers because VA can't be everywhere. But overall the VA MUST remain at the center of veterans health care.

So I'm pleased to report that the VA MISSION Act includes two major reforms that—if properly implemented—could modernize and strengthen the VA health care system for decades to come.

First, the legislation will phase out the deeply flawed Veterans Choice Program and will replace it with new integrated networks of VA and community care providers with VA serving as the primary provider and coordinator of care.

Second, the VA MISSION Act establishes a new infrastructure review process that—if properly executed— could provide VA with sustained long-term investments necessary to modernize, rebuild and maintain its health care infrastructure.

Although an early version of the legislation proposed a BRAC-like process, DAV and other VSOs blocked that idea and forced Congress to make dozens of changes.

We demanded—and we got—language to ensure the infrastructure review will be done in an open and transparent manner. Most importantly, the law mandates that VSOs and veterans will be full participants as decisions are made about the future of OUR health care system.

Of course, the VA MISSION Act is not perfect. As House VA Chairman Phil Roe said, "I haven't seen a perfect bill be written yet."

However, this carefully crafted compromise represents a balanced approach to ensuring timely access to care while continuing to strengthen VA.

That's why DAV and 37 other major veterans service organizations supported the legislation.

And that's why it passed the House 347 to 70, passed the Senate 92 to 5 and was signed into law by the President last month.

So while it's not perfect, after years of talking there is finally a clear path forward to reform veterans health care.

We are also continuing to make progress in our efforts so ALL women veterans can receive the health care services and benefits they have earned.

As many of you will recall, four years ago DAV released a special report on Women Veterans which documented the challenges they face during their transition from military to civilian life.

The report contained 27 major recommendations to improve the delivery of services and benefits to women veterans. Our report received tremendous coverage in the media and at three Congressional hearings, leading to more than two dozen bills being introduced. I'm very pleased to report that as of today, Congress, VA and other federal agencies have addressed -- in whole or in part -- all but 5 of the 27 recommendations made in our 2014 report.

I can also announce today that DAV will be releasing a second women veterans report this fall with over three dozen recommendations to support women who served.

It is really a special year for women at DAV. Not only do we have a strong woman commander at our highest post, but our Freedom Award recipient and Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year are also women warriors.

But now is not the time to rest on our laurels. We must continue to lead the fight to ensure women veterans have equal access to the high-quality benefits and health care services they have earned.

Another legislative victory from the past year is reform of the appeals system at VA.

With strong grassroots support, we helped push legislation through both the House and Senate last year. And shortly after concluding our convention in New Orleans, the Appeals Modernization Act was signed into law.

Although the law doesn't take full effect until next February, we worked closely with VA and the Board of Veterans Appeals to allow veterans early access through the Rapid Appeals Modernization Program, called RAMP.

In its first eight months, over 30,000 veterans opted into RAMP resulting in over 8,000 new decisions in an average of 76 days, providing over \$28 million dollars in new compensation payments.

Of that, I'm proud to report DAV represented over 1,300 veterans, helping them to receive over \$8.5 million dollars in retroactive compensation benefits.

And that's just a sliver of what our Service Department does. In 100 offices across the country, DAV's service officers are on the front lines.

Last year, we interviewed over 300,000 veterans and their families and filed nearly 200,000 new claims for benefits. We obtained more than \$4.3 billion in new and retroactive benefits for them. In total, we represent over 1.1 million veterans, far more than any other veterans' service organization.

And thanks to our training programs for national, department and chapter service officers; our new Case Management System; and our industry-leading iTrack training system, DAV continues to set the standard in providing the highest quality service to veterans. Simply put, when it comes to helping veterans get their benefits, no one does more—or does it better—than DAV.

And when disaster strikes, DAV is there to help.

Last year, we provided more than \$1.3 million in direct aid to veterans in Puerto Rico and across the country after devastating storms and natural disasters. Through a partnership with the PenFed Foundation, we helped distribute almost \$500,000 to support ill and injured veterans who faced severe financial hardships.

But as impressive as these statistics are, it is the real life stories of veterans we help that best illustrate who we are and what we do. Here's one of those stories.

That story—and thousands more like it—are what define our success.

George Washington Carver once said that: "It is not the style of clothes one wears, neither the kind of automobile one drives, nor the amount of money one has in the bank, that counts. These mean nothing. It is simply service that measures success."

I couldn't agree more.

But for all our successes in recent years, we must never become complacent. As Mark Twain said: "Success is a journey, not a destination. It requires constant effort, vigilance and reevaluation."

And so our journey continues.

There will be more victories. For years we've worked to ensure all Vietnam veterans who suffer from illnesses as a result of exposure to toxins are eligible for compensation. And I'm pleased to report that the House of Representatives just passed legislation that will—if approved by the Senate—provide long overdue justice to Blue Water Navy veterans.

But there will also be challenges and dangers ahead. In the past year we have had to fight back proposals to reduce disability compensation payments by rounding down the annual Cost of Living Adjustment and eliminate individual unemployability benefits for thousands of older veterans.

That's why we focused on revitalizing our Benefit Protection Teams. As former Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill observed, "All politics is local."

He was right. No matter how often we meet and talk to Congressional leaders in Washington, it is our local DAV members and leaders back home who truly move them.

Now, more than ever, we'll be counting on you—all of you—to continue standing with us to help veterans lead high-quality lives with dignity and respect.

Later this year on November 11th, we will commemorate the 100th Anniversary of World War I—what President Woodrow Wilson called "The War to End All Wars."

Unfortunately, it was not to be.

25 years later we were in the middle of a Second World War.

25 years after that, the Vietnam War raged, and a Cold War got colder. 25 years later, the Cold War had ended but there were new wars in the Persian Gulf, and later Iraq and Afghanistan, where we still have troops in harm's way.

That's why for nearly a century, DAV has been dedicated to serving our fellow veterans.

All of us here today are part of a great connected thread—from DAV's founding in 1920 to this convention here today.

And that thread must continue.

Navy veteran, Senator and Attorney General Robert Kennedy, who was cut down by an assassin's bullet 50 summers ago, once said that:

"Few will have the greatness to bend history itself, but each of us can work to change a small portion of events -- and in the total of all those acts -- will be written the history of this generation." Kennedy's words perfectly describe DAV.

From Washington, DC to Cold Spring, Kentucky, to the 50 states and thousands of cities and towns across this great nation—all of us—DAV members, Auxiliary, family and supporters—are making history one day at a time through the acts of service we perform for America's heroes.

May God Bless our continuing work for those who served. And may God Bless DAV.

Commander Metcalf-Foster, that concludes my report.