

VETERANS DAY
2013



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

Many of you know that Veterans Day became a part of our American calendar in 1919, following the end of World War I. But many, many Novembers ago, right around this time in 1783, in Rocky Hill, New Jersey, just six years before he would serve as the first elected leader of this great nation, General George Washington was bidding his farewell to the Continental Army.

Though George Washington personally identified himself as a citizen farmer and is remembered primarily as our nation's first president – he was also a veteran. And as so many of us have done in our lives, he closed the chapter on military service to transition to a new life and new ways to serve his fellow citizens.

He asked, “Shall not the brave men who have contributed so essentially to these inestimable acquisitions, retiring victorious from the field of war, to the field of agriculture, participate in all the blessings which have been obtained?”

Washington’s core beliefs bled through each line of this farewell, calling to the forefront the obligation of our nation to embrace her veterans and to share with them the fruits of labor so hard won by years of revolution.

“Officers and soldiers,” Washington said, “may expect considerable assistance in recommencing their civil occupations from the sums due to them from the public, which must and will most inevitably be paid.”

Simply put, he said we must fulfill our promises to those who had served.

By choosing to attend this Veterans Day observance, you demonstrate that you, too, believe in fulfilling those promises. And I am humbled to be part of DAV – an organization that has been so deeply committed to this great cause for nearly a century.

We Americans should be inspired with “astonishment and gratitude” for the liberties and freedoms which have been secured by those willing to undertake the tremendous burdens of war. Even the most unobservant citizen, Washington said, could not help but take note of the “unparalleled perseverance of the armies of the United States, through almost every possible suffering and discouragement, for the space of eight long years.”

General Washington believed that for his soldiers to be standing after eight years of war was nothing short of a miracle. Our military today has now been at war for twelve. How, then, can we owe our returning servicemen and women any less today than Washington called for then?

Think of the veteran who, as Washington put it, “must now console himself for any unpleasant circumstances which may have occurred, by a recollection of the uncommon scenes in which he has been called to act, no inglorious part; and the astonishing events of which he has been a witness.”

The needs of that veteran, a Continental Army soldier from 230 years in our past, are not so different from the needs of our veterans today.

They need jobs and they need a livelihood. They need to be welcomed home with a stalwart commitment to their physical and emotional healing. They need time to adjust to a pace and a mission not determined by constant conflict, and a community that understands and is ready to meet the unique needs of veterans, particularly those touched by illness or injury.

Speaking to the Army, Washington explained, “The Commander in Chief conceives little is now waiting to enable the soldier to change the military character into that of the citizen.” Two centuries later, we have made great strides to make our heroes whole. We have a wide range of resources to set our veterans on the path to successful civilian life. Still, no challenge could be greater than making that transition.

General Washington spoke often of American unity and cohesion, knowing these are the hallmark traits of a public rallied around our servicemembers. He was a veteran, deeply and indelibly concerned with the welfare of his comrades long after they had left the field of battle.

Though he outspokenly hoped for America’s permanent cessation from war, if George Washington were alive today there is no question he would have the same commitment to serve his fellow living veterans, and to forever honor the memory of those who have perished in defense of the nation.

When General Washington made this speech, he had just led his troops through eight long years of war and suffering. Under his leadership, that soldier and farmer oversaw the birth and growth of this new nation. The blood of his military soaked the soil that would one day yield the America we know today. From there forward, every man and woman fortunate enough to live here as a free American citizen and every person who has sought refuge within the safety of our borders has done so at the cost of a veteran's sacrifice.

That is why this centuries-old commitment to veterans remains DAV's charge today. It is not the sacrifice of one veteran, but of all veterans of all American wars that have afforded us the opportunity to stand here today in freedom. And it is the reason we continue to fight for better, more fulfilling lives for our military veterans and their families day in and day out...which is not just an obligation, but also an outstanding honor and our duty as grateful Americans.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today and for taking this moment to show your gratitude and respect for those who have served. May God bless each of you and May God bless our nation's veterans.

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