

**The
American
Legion**



For God and country

Suggested Speech

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The American Legion 96th Birthday 2015

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Over the years, many historians, writers and speakers have told the story of The American Legion's founding – but few recall it as eloquently as legendary commentator Paul Harvey did during our organization's National Convention 50 years ago.

“What is the big idea of The American Legion?” Harvey asked. “What is the star we steer by? What is the stickum that's held three generations of warriors together, consecrated, dedicated, uncontaminated?”

A veteran of the Army Air Force, Harvey said the Legion's “big idea” was found in the first four word of the organization's Constitution – “For God and Country.”

“This was never meant to be the story of young Teddy Roosevelt or Warren Grim or Bennett Clark or Wild Bill Donovan,” Harvey said of the Legion's founders.

“This is the story of something worth dying for – worth working at. This is the story of the Big Idea – The American Legion – an association for God and country. Look out, you enemies of these—there’s courage here we haven’t even used yet. Three million men are closing ranks again – three million time-proven keepers of the flame!”

When Harvey made his remarks in Portland, Oregon, the country was embroiled in the Vietnam War, prayer had only recently been banned from public school rooms and violence plagued many communities.

Today, we face different challenges but there is a new generation of Legionnaires – men and women – that are as equally committed as their predecessors to keeping the flame of freedom alive.

It would be easy to rest on the significant accomplishments of drafting the original GI Bill or creating the Department of Veterans Affairs but that is not The American Legion way. Instead of “Mission Accomplished,” we say, “Still Serving.” Because that is what The American Legion does. It is who we are.

The spirit of the Legion is much the same as it was in 1919. We serve those who served and we serve America. Our founders didn’t rest when they fought in the trenches “Over There,” and their successors didn’t rest a generation later when they defeated Hitler’s Germany and the Japanese Empire.

The American Legion was there to support those fighting in frigid Korea, the jungles of Vietnam and every other place where America’s military answered the call.

The American Legion is still the leading advocate for those serving in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere in the war on terrorism.

For 96 years, The American Legion has led the charge as America's leading advocate for veterans health care and rehabilitation, children and youth programs, a strong national security policy and one-hundred percent Americanism.

In recent years, The American Legion has delivered millions of dollars in comfort items to wounded, injured, and ill servicemembers and patients recovering in military hospitals, warrior transition units and VA Medical Centers through our Operation Comfort Warriors program.

In 1990, The "Family Support Network" was formed by The American Legion to assist the families of military personnel deployed during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm in the Middle East.

In 2001, we initiated the American Legion Legacy Scholarship Fund, which enables children of military personnel killed on duty since 9/11 to receive money toward a college education.

Over the last decade, thanks in large part to the Departments of The American Legion, The American Legion Riders and other motorcycle enthusiasts, millions of dollars have been raised for the Scholarship Fund through cross-country motorcycle rides from Indianapolis to the host cities of our national conventions. With your help and support, we can continue to make the ride a success and ensure that no children of our fallen heroes are denied educations because of financial hardship.

And we are fierce advocates of providing quality health care to America's veterans when they need it.

Last year, The American Legion was the first among veterans service organizations in demanding that VA be held accountable for widespread scandals at medical centers across the country.

The Legion heard horror story after horror story of veterans dying while waiting for care, administrators cooking the books and excessive bonuses being awarded to people who deserved to be fired. A culture of fear and retaliation seemed to be pervasive throughout the VA Health Care System.

But The American Legion acted decisively in calling for the resignation of the VA Secretary and his top deputies. We were instrumental in the passage of the Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act of 2014.

The new law, while still not perfect, weeds out dishonest and corrupt practices that put personal performance evaluations ahead of veterans.

And while we believe patient accessibility has been improving, The Legion did not simply wait for the government to act.

Through a series of townhalls and Crisis Command Centers, we heard from veterans in Arizona, North Carolina, Texas, Maryland, Hawaii, Missouri, West Virginia, Colorado, Washington, and Oregon.

In just the first few months, The American Legion helped more than 3,000 veterans and their families receive the benefits that they earned. More than one million dollars of on-the-spot retroactive benefits were awarded at these Crisis Centers.

We also know that America must be strong for America to be safe. We remain vigilant about our call for a fully funded national defense.

Syria is a mess. Iran and North Korea are hell-bent on becoming nuclear powers and our troops are still fighting a war in Afghanistan. ISIS and other terrorist organizations have committed the most depraved and cruel atrocities imaginable.

Yet sequestration still looms and our military is still funded at pre-World War II levels.

Former Defense Secretary Leon Panetta once called sequestration “a crazy doomsday scenario.”

Yet, for our military, their families and our national security – it remains a reality.

The enemies that we face today are as evil as any that our country has ever fought.

Years of war in Afghanistan and Iraq have taken a toll on this country. But this is not new. War is always an “ugly thing” as John Stuart Mill once said.

The United States is a peace-loving nation and our country deliberated for many years before entering World War I and World War II.

Nobody hates war more than those who have had to fight it, but if it must be fought – it must be won.

During war or peace, The American Legion will always be there to express our gratitude for our defenders of freedom.

“We support the troops” is not just a slogan to us. It’s a way of life.

To each of you, I say thank you comrades, for what you do for our veterans, for God and for Country.

May God bless you all and God bless The American Legion.

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