VETERANS DAY SPEECH 2011
Google the term “National Debt” and you will quickly receive the search results for 28.7 million websites.

Most deal with the very serious issues of government overspending and the accumulation of more than two centuries of federal deficits. Yet very few bring up the biggest national debt of them all – that which America owes to her veterans.

Marine Sergeant Dakota Meyer is one who America owes an enormous debt. Humble by nature, but heroic by deed, Sergeant Meyer drove a humvee into an Afghanistan valley that he knew was heavily populated with well-armed enemy insurgents. Outgunned and outnumbered, Sergeant Meyer and Staff Sergeant Juan Rodriguez-Chavez made multiple trips to the hot zone, killing insurgents as Sergeant Meyer manned the turret.
Disregarding serious shrapnel wounds that he received, Sergeant Meyer left his vehicle several times searching for pinned down friends and coalition forces.

He found his friends and comrades shot to death, but with the assistance of Army Captain Will Swenson, Sergeant Meyer carried their bodies and gear away from the village.

As he received his well-deserved Medal of Honor from President Obama, Sergeant Meyer requested that his fallen colleagues be remembered.

First Lieutenant Michael Johnson, Gunnery Sergeant Edwin Johnson, Staff Sergeant Aaron Kenefick, Hospitalman Third Class James Layton and Sergeant First Class Kenneth Westbrook, we salute you. Sergeant Meyer did not leave you behind, and as a nation, we must never forget your sacrifice.
And we also honor the more than one million American men and women who have given their lives for their country since our nation’s founding.

Our debt to these heroes can never be re-paid but our gratitude and respect must last forever.

For many veterans, our nation was important enough to endure long separations from their families, miss the births of their children, freeze in sub-zero temperatures, bake in wild jungles, lose limbs, and, far too often, lose their lives.

Military spouses have had to endure career interruptions, frequent changes of address, and a disproportionate share of parental responsibilities.

The children often had to endure changes in schools, separation from friends and, hardest of all, the uncertainty of whether or not Mom or Dad will live through their next combat tour.
The American Legion’s National Commander, Fang Wong, recently told Congress that it is not in the nature of America’s warriors to complain. Warriors endure. Warriors make do with less. Warriors finish the job, no matter how hard, no matter what is asked.

Warriors need advocates and that is why The American Legion exists. We are here to serve veterans, their families and our communities. Veterans need each other, but, more importantly, our country needs our veterans.

You cannot fight a war without veterans and while the utopian idea of a society without war is appealing, let us not forget that wars have liberated slaves, stopped genocide and toppled terrorists.
Stephen Ambrose once wrote, “America’s wars have been like rungs on a ladder by which it rose to greatness. No other country has triumphed so long, so consistently or on such a vast scale through force of arms.”

It has been often said that without our veterans, Americans would be speaking Russian, German or, perhaps, Japanese. Regardless of which view of alternative history you take, we do know that without our veterans America would not be America.

The American Legion shows its support for America’s heroes through its Family Support Network, Legacy Scholarship Fund, Operation Comfort Warriors, Temporary Financial Assistance and the National Emergency Fund, just to name a few of our programs.

But you can show your support simply by saying “Thank you” to the next veteran you meet.
You can show your support by hiring a veteran in your workplace, visiting a VA hospital or donating to a veterans program.

Companies should understand that it’s smart business to hire veterans, and when members of the Guard and Reserves deploy, it is America’s business to ensure that their civilian careers do not suffer.

Homelessness is another issue that affects veterans disproportionately. Too often today’s tattered citizen of the street was yesterday’s toast-of-the-town in a crisp uniform with rows of shining medals. This is hardly the “thanks of a grateful nation.”

We can do better. We must do better.
Fortunately, veterans don’t ask for much. Benefits are a mere drop in the bucket compared to the financial and human cost of war. But, nonetheless, we still owe them.

In 1979 author Tom Wolfe wrote a book about the Mercury 7 astronauts called “The Right Stuff.” As heroic veterans they certainly earned the distinction, but, my friends, I would not limit the title to that group only. Anyone who has honorably worn a United States military uniform has *The Right Stuff.*

Remember **that** - the next time you see a homeless person on the street, a man in a wheelchair or a difficult co-worker who is experiencing PTSD.
Historians have said that Dwight Eisenhower was prouder of being a soldier than he was of being the president. And while relatively few veterans ever reach the rank of general, pride in ones’ military service is a bond shared by nearly all who have served.

This pride is on display on every obituary page in the country, where military service – regardless of how many decades have passed and subsequent achievements reached – is mentioned with the death notice of nearly every deceased veteran.

Can any CEO or distinguished Ivy League graduate truly claim to have more responsibility than the 21-year-old squad leader walking point on patrol in Baghdad?
And while the successful real estate mogul may have sold hundreds of homes and raised a wonderful family, what single accomplishment tops the decisive actions he took during the siege of Khe (Kay) Sanh (Sahn) which saved the lives of several of his fellow Marines?

Yes, my friends, nothing they ever do will eclipse their military service and they do have the right stuff!

Fewer than 10 percent of Americans can claim the title “veteran.” And while the great military phrase “uncommon valor was a common virtue,” has been so often repeated that it risks becoming a cliché, it is no less true.
In 1789 George Washington said, "The willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional as to how they perceive the veterans of earlier wars were treated and appreciated by their country."

We must ask ourselves as a nation, are we serving veterans even half as well as they have served us?

As we honor our 23 million living veterans from the Greatest Generation to the Latest Generation, let us never forget this debt that is owed. No government commission or single dollar amount can adequately re-pay what has been given to all of us throughout our nation’s history.
Through their blood, service and sacrifice, veterans have given us freedom, security and the greatest nation on earth. It is impossible to put a price on that.

We must remember them. We must appreciate them.

God bless you all for being here, God bless our veterans and God bless America.

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