The American Legion

For God and Country

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VETERANS DAY SPEECH 2014

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Seventy years ago, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed what many historians consider the greatest social legislation ever passed by the U.S. Congress. As popular as the GI Bill remains today, it took the horrific cost and bloodshed of World War II to remind many Americans just how great a debt is owed to our veterans.

In 1932, thousands of World War I veterans camped out in Washington, D.C., to petition their government for bonuses that they felt were owed. Their campsite was forcibly overrun by the U.S. Army, and at least two veterans were killed by the police. President Franklin Roosevelt told The American Legion National Convention in 1933 that –quote "No person because he wore a uniform must thereafter be placed in a special class of beneficiaries over and above other citizens," – unquote.

While Roosevelt would later prove himself to be a great wartime commander-in-chief, what he and others failed to realize at the time is that veterans were not asking to be part of a “special class.” They just wanted a shot at the American dream that they fought so hard to defend.

Most Americans profess to truly love our veterans, especially at gatherings like this on Veterans Day and Memorial Day.

And while their feelings are usually sincere, it is important to remember that veterans are defending us 365 days a year. The heroism that has been demonstrated time and again by veterans from the American Revolution to the Global War on Terrorism is sometimes unnoticed by those of us who enjoy the security that their sacrifice has provided.

Army Staff Sergeant Clinton Romesha has seen war at its very worst. While serving at Combat Outpost Keating in Afghanistan, he and his comrades awakened to an attack by an estimated 300 enemy fighters on October 3, 2009. According to his Medal of Honor citation, Staff Sergeant Romesha took out an enemy machine gun team, and engaged in taking out a second, when he received shrapnel wounds from a rocket propelled grenade. He continued to fight on.

He killed at least three other Taliban fighters and directed air support to destroy 30 other enemy fighters. After receiving the nation's highest military medal, Staff Sergeant Romesha said he felt conflicted.

"The joy," he said, "comes from recognition of us doing our jobs as soldiers on distant battlefields but is countered by the constant reminder of the loss of our battle buddies. My battle buddies. My soldiers. My friends."

Staff Sergeant Romesha's attitude is not hard to find among the living Medal of Honor recipients. They will never forget the sacrifice of their friends and neither will the Gold Star families, who will have to cope without the embrace of their loved ones.

The innocence of their grieving children will be challenged by the dramatic change affecting the balance of security and comfort in their family routine. The hearts of these families will feel the sharp sting of their loss, leaving them only with memories of their loving mom or dad. Life as they have known it will be much harder from now on.

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 deal with 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.

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.

And as we look at the Middle East today, we know that there is a large, dangerous and committed group of fanatics that wants us dead. And while ISIS, al Qaeda and other terrorists may lack the conventional weapons of Nazi Germany or Imperial Japan, they are every bit as evil in their intentions.

Those who defend us from our enemies must be supported. Whether their service was in Baghdad or Beirut, we need to serve veterans as well as they serve us – even when the guns have temporarily stopped firing.

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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.

Veterans don't ask for much. They do not want to be in a "special class," but benefits are a mere drop in the bucket compared to the financial and human cost of war. And while not all veterans see war, all who served in the military have expressed a willingness to fight if called to.

You can show your support for these great men and women 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.

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 Afghanistan?

Fewer than 10 percent of Americans can claim the title “veteran.” Far less than 1 percent of our population is currently defending us in the Global War on Terrorism. And yet many seem intent on trying to balance the federal budget by diminishing the quality of life programs designed for the families who have already disproportionately made these sacrifices.

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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