The American Legion

For God and Country

★ MEDIA & COMMUNICATIONS ★ P.O. BOX 1055 ★ INDIANAPOLIS, IN 46206-1055
★ (317) 630-1253 ★ Fax (317) 630-1368

The American Legion 100th Birthday 2019

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The American Legion came to life in Paris, France, March 15 to 17, 1919. War-weary members of the American Expeditionary Forces who had fought to victory in World War One and remained in Europe, restlessly awaiting passage home, gathered for what became known as the Paris Caucus.

In the months that followed the armistice of November 11, 1918, they had time to think about life after the war and what they might do…

In support of their wounded comrades.

In honor of the fallen.

To help surviving spouses and orphans.

To protect the democracy they pledged their lives to defend.

And to chart a new course for future generations of Americans.

These troops envisioned a different kind of veterans association. It would be like none before it, or any that would follow.

The American Legion would be built on strengthening the nation – *not serving themselves* – through four primary pillars of volunteer work on behalf of:

Veterans.

Defense.

Youth.

And Americanism.

Of course, the organization made a high priority of compassionate care and treatment for disabled veterans returning to civilian life. Such care and treatment were desperately lacking in the United States at the time.

But The American Legion would reach into many other layers of society, some of which puzzled the public.

Why, for instance, does a veterans group operate a nationwide youth baseball program?

A speech contest?

A mock government for high school students?

Why the emphasis on naturalization and citizenship for legal immigrants?

And is it really a veteran's job to build city parks, install swimming pools, carve out hiking trails, form

community bands, manage ambulance systems, rescue flood victims and lead Boy Scout units?

The American Legion would spend the next century firmly establishing that such purposes strengthen the nation.

Since the very beginning – front and center – has been compassionate and comprehensive treatment for those who served in uniform and came home changed by military experience.

The effects of wartime service were especially profound for The American Legion's first generation.

They had been attacked and wounded by weapons previously unseen in history.

They had been poisoned and blinded by chemical gas.

Nearly half of their fatalities had come from illnesses caused by unsanitary conditions, lack of medicine and rancid food on the battle fields and at sea.

They suffered psychological effects ignored at the time by medicine, the military and government.

These effects – known then as “shell shock” – would sweep decorated combat veterans into asylums, jails and onto the streets … where relief was not forthcoming.

The founding Legionnaires faced uncertain futures in a U.S. economy that had stormed forward while they were fighting in the muddy trenches of Europe to protect others, both foreign and domestic.

And then, coming home greatly altered by their experiences, many of these early Legionnaires knew they would face racism, sexism, elitism, deficient health care, scant transition programs and public misunderstanding – even ridicule and scorn.

The American Legion was determined to change the culture and public perception, no matter what it took, about veterans and the honorable nature of military service.

These veterans would spend the next century – as each war era begat a new generation of Legionnaires – devoted to community-building, the welfare of children, patriotism, education, peace and goodwill.

The inspiration for this mission can be traced to the civilian military camps where many eventual American

Legion founders trained prior to U.S. entry in World War One.

This was known as the Preparedness Movement.

The movement arose in defiance of U.S. policy to stay out of the Great War in Europe. Those who trained in the camps believed that if America did eventually get called to fight, too few were trained, equipped or inspired to succeed.

So they took it upon themselves, as volunteers, to become prepared.

One of the Preparedness Movement's charter members was Theodore Roosevelt Junior, son of the 26th U.S. President, who had trained in the Plattsburgh, New York, civilian camps long before U.S. entry in the war.

Roosevelt Junior and others who would later start The American Legion were quickly commissioned as officers once the United States entered the fighting overseas.

In command, the future American Legion founders soon discovered – as uneducated draftees trained with sticks because rifles were in short supply – that the U.S. military was in poor shape for wartime service.

In a matter of 18 months, however, active-duty personnel soared from 300,000 to 4 million, the majority of whom were drafted into the deadliest U.S. confrontation in over a half- century, one that would put them up against superior and better trained armies, navies and air fighters in Europe.

The challenging World War One experiences of the founders framed the mission and identity of The American Legion.

America needed to become stronger – and in more ways than bullets for soldiers and hospital beds for the wounded.

The American Legion would press for education, literacy and understanding of U.S. democracy.

The organization would especially focus on young people, immigrants and first-generation citizens who, during the war, often spoke English only as a second language and did not fully understand the principles they had been called upon to defend.

Such citizens were also often the recruiting targets of anti-democracy movements that would arise in the years to come – Bolshevism, fascism and, later, Nazism.

The American Legion would chisel principles into the Preamble to its Constitution.

Justice.

Freedom.

Democracy.

The early American Legion swiftly planted programs nationwide to improve physical fitness in part so the United States could quickly summon to arms – should the need arise again (and it did) – healthy military personnel who understood what they were to fight for.

The American Legion elevated public appreciation for the U.S. Flag, the Constitution, law enforcement, faith, civic responsibility and community service.

The founding generation was ahead of its time, devout in its mantra that a veteran is a veteran, regardless of race, gender, duty station, political party, rank or branch of service. Women veterans were members and leaders of

The American Legion, for instance, before they had the right to vote for President of the United States.

The founders also believed that each veteran, in honor of all who sacrificed for American principles, has an **individual obligation to:**

Community.

State.

And nation.

Specific accomplishments of The American Legion's first century are numerous and significant – local and global alike in their impact.

The American Legion demanded a coherent, effective federal agency to fulfill disability benefits, provide health care, education and economic opportunities for veterans. Prior to The American Legion, no such federal agency existed.

Out of that priority came the Veterans Bureau in 1922, the Veterans Administration in 1930 and the Department of Veterans Affairs in 1989.

Along the way, The American Legion has battled persistently in Washington to protect veterans benefits

from budget cuts and to demand quality, timely VA health care when such services were not responsibly fulfilled by the government.

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 – better known as the GI Bill – did more than improve the lives of veterans. It reshaped the future of America. Conceived, drafted and steered to passage by The American Legion, the GI Bill made higher education, home ownership and gainful employment reasonable expectations not only for veterans but for all Americans. It created the Middle Class and propelled a half-century of economic prosperity. Simply put, more than any other government program, it prevented a post-war resumption of the Great Depression.

Less known is that the GI Bill also provided – for the first time in U.S. history – the ability for a veteran to dispute the characterization of military discharge. Prior to The American Legion, a dishonorable discharge could be issued purely at the discretion of a commanding officer without the need to explain why.

In a similar way, The American Legion helped establish a Board of Veterans Appeals, giving those who dispute their VA claims decisions a day in court to make their cases.

American Legion-led conferences in 1923 and 1924 established the first standard rules of respect that would later be passed into law as U.S. Flag Code.

American Legion Baseball would become a national program in 1926, promoting teamwork, discipline and physical fitness for tens of thousands of young people – many of whom would be called to a second world war in 1941.

American Legion Boys State and Boys Nation were launched in 1937 and 1946 respectively to provide young men firsthand understanding of how government and civil service function in a democracy. The American Legion Auxiliary would soon organize parallel programs for young women. These programs have cultivated thousands of elected officials, judges, educators, business leaders and one U.S. president.

The annual American Legion National Oratorical Contest, which began in 1941, has called on young competitors to not only talk a good game but to fully understand the U.S. Constitution and the rights of Americans. Like Boys State and Boys Nation, it too has produced thousands of leaders and public servants through the decades.

In 1925, American Legion National Commander James Drain raised five million dollars to seed a foundation that would serve two of the organization's primary purposes – help for disabled veterans and assistance for children, especially those at risk due to circumstances beyond their control.

The American Legion Endowment Fund – now operating as The American Legion Veterans & Children Foundation – has trained scores of American Legion service officers who provide free assistance for veterans.

At any given time, more than 3,000 trained American Legion service officers today are assisting – free of charge –some 750,000 veterans and their families who are due government benefits, health care and opportunities.

From that 1925 American Legion fundraiser and contributions that followed, tens of millions of dollars have been distributed to help children and parents facing economic, physical or environmental crises.

By providing such support, The American Legion was working to strengthen the nation.

The American Legion fought for decades to strengthen the nation through “Universal Military Training” so America could be prepared in the event of war.

This was not to be *mandatory military service*, as some nations impose. UMT simply aimed to establish a trained citizenry – as was the focus of the Preparedness Movement – to improve the nation’s ability to defend itself if necessary.

Out of this came the Reserve Forces Act of 1955 – establishing the modern Reserve component of the U.S. military and a stronger National Guard, which have proven so vital to America, especially in the War on Terrorism.

In communities nationwide, The American Legion has also sponsored and supported thousands of Junior ROTC units, youth law enforcement academies and a Junior

Shooting Sports program, launched in 1991, that have prepared young people to stand strong, disciplined and unified in times of war, peace or unexpected calamity.

Immediately following The American Legion's birth in 1919, disaster relief arose as a natural function for the fast-growing veterans association – which within its first eight months had grown to 685,000 members and more than 5,500 posts in communities worldwide.

Earthquakes, fires, tornados, floods and other natural emergencies have brought out the best in The American Legion over the decades. Wartime veterans have proven uniquely well-suited to handle life-threatening catastrophes with the kind of teamwork, discipline, communications skills and sense of mission that came through military training and experience.

It was The American Legion in 1927 and 1937 – two of the most devastating flood years in history – that mobilized rescue crews, found stranded families, fed and sheltered them. In time to come, deadly hurricanes Camille, Hugo, Katrina and others destroyed countless homes and lives. The American Legion went right to work

– as it did following the terrorist attacks of 9/11 – to stabilize communities that had been turned upside down by unforeseeable emergencies.

The American Legion's National Emergency Fund has disbursed tens of millions of dollars to disaster victims since its creation in 1989. The fund simply provided a financial foundation to a role The American Legion had been fulfilling in times of disaster since 1919.

Each new era of wartime service has bred its own set of priorities for The American Legion.

The GI Bill gave World War II veterans a chance to succeed in the nation they fought with their lives to protect.

The Back to God movement sought to strengthen families through faith in the 1950s.

The American Legion's groundbreaking research and relentless pursuit of truth has helped countless veterans suffering with post-traumatic stress disorder and health problems related to atomic radiation, Agent Orange, Gulf War Illness, burn pits and other service-connected conditions.

American Legion research and advocacy made PTSD a recognized diagnosis in 1980 – after over a half-century of fighting on behalf of those who came home suffering from the invisible wounds of war.

The American Legion and Columbia University teamed up in the 1980s to prove that Agent Orange had sickened and killed thousands of Vietnam War veterans, and caused birth defects among their children.

In 1990, The American Legion was forced to sue the federal government to act on its findings and provide care for veterans and families suffering with conditions related to Agent Orange exposure.

Prior to The American Legion's efforts, veterans affected by deadly toxins, chemicals and radiation while serving in the military received no recognition from the government they swore with their lives to defend.

In the post-9/11 era, The American Legion's portfolio of advocacy has included:

- Acceptance of all effective treatments for PTSD and traumatic brain injury – *not prescription drugs alone*

- Thousands of career fairs, business workshops and education forums to give veterans opportunities to succeed after service
- Persistent demand for a well-funded VA health-care system and timely disability benefits decisions for veterans
- And a modern post-9/11 GI Bill to best meet the needs of 21st century veteran students, entrepreneurs and their families
  Casually known as the “Forever GI Bill,” its official name is the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act, in honor of The American Legion Past National Commander who was chief architect of the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, the original GI Bill.

At this very moment, a new American Legion post is forming on the campus of the University of Illinois to support student veterans using their Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits.

That particular American Legion post, like thousands of others around the world, is named in honor of a fallen wartime U.S. veteran. It chose Shawna Morrison as its heroic namesake. Shawna's life was taken by a roadside bomb in 2004, when she was deployed to Iraq with her National Guard unit.

Reflecting the diversity of the 21st century military, the new post was started by an African-American woman who served alongside Morrison during the War on Terrorism.

To preserve the memories and incidents of our associations in the great wars, The American Legion has stood as the conscience of a nation, through honor and remembrance of all who gave their lives so others might live in freedom.

From the 1920s, when American Legion posts and departments erected thousands of monuments and memorials to fallen heroes, to the U.S. flags provided free of charge by The American Legion to decorate overseas military graves, to the prayer recited at official meetings of The American Legion to never forget those taken prisoner of war, it has been the sacred duty of the nation's largest

veterans organization to always remember those who served in uniform but cannot be with us anymore.

Among the 10 lines of The American Legion's mission statement – the Preamble to its Constitution – only one is even loosely dedicated to self interest – "to consecrate and sanctify our comradeship by our devotion to mutual helpfulness."

The other nine lines speak to The American Legion's broader purposes:

"to defend the Constitution of the United States of America"

"to maintain law and order"

"to foster and perpetuate a 100 percent Americanism"

"to inculcate a sense of individual obligation to community, state and nation"

"to combat the autocracy of both the classes and the masses"

"to make right the master of might"

"to promote peace and goodwill on earth"

And

“to safeguard and transmit to posterity the principles of justice, freedom and democracy”

Over the last century, only one line has changed, making plural “our associations in the great wars.”

The purposes upon which The American Legion associates together have proven timeless over its first century.

Those purposes have made lives better for millions of Americans.

They have built a legacy like no other in the history of the United States.

They have strengthened the nation and, as new posts begin their journeys into The American Legion’s second century, those purposes continuously prove vital and necessary for the strength of a nation, for generations yet to come.

Thank you, God Bless America and God Bless our American Legion.

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