

**Veterans Day**  
**November 11, 1996**

*Speech*

If you would like to try an interesting experiment, ask a neighbor, friend, or family member these three questions:

**First question: What does Veterans Day mean to you?**

**Second question: What exactly is a "veteran"?**

**Third Question: Why do we honor our veterans?**

You might just be surprised at some of the answers you hear. Let me give you a sampling from an informal survey. These questions were asked of a variety of people of all ages - some in the military, some with ties to the military, some with no ties or experience with the military at all.

Let's take the first question - What does Veterans Day mean to you? Here are some of the responses:

- "Well, I hate to admit it, but I never gave it much thought."

● "It's a commemoration service to men and women who have given their time to protect our country and others."

● "It means a day off from work and avoiding parades because I don't like crowds."

● "For me, it's been a mix. I have marched in one parade on Veterans Day, but usually I was in the field ... or serving overseas in Kuwait or Haiti. The few times I was home I just used it like most people as a day to rake the leaves."

● "I think of older World War Two vets in uniform saluting the flag."

"It's a day I remember the many people who served under me, especially those we lost. It's a day I remember the comradeship - something strong that you just don't find much in our society."

"For many people, Veterans Day comes and goes without much notice. Very few businesses give it off. Even those who do get it off probably don't think about the reason behind it."

I expect you will find, as I did, that this day means many different things to different people. The meaning often depends on their military experience or lack thereof, or the military experience of their relatives, or it depends on their age, or maybe even the part of the country they come from.

The tradition of honoring American veterans began on November 11, 1919, one year after World War One ended. President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed that each November 11th was to be commemorated as "Armistice Day," a day of remembrance to honor the 116,000 Americans who died in the World War. In 1954, Armistice Day was redesignated "Veterans Day." With the new name, the observance was given a broader scope: to honor all American veterans, living, and dead, in whatever war or period of peace they served.

Since that time you will find that the day has been commemorated in different ways throughout the United States. Some communities hold large parades or banquets to honor all

**veterans.**

**Some of these celebrations are ongoing annual traditions carried on by the energy and hard work of many people - and often the work of just a handful of dedicated people. In Albany, Oregon, for example, the annual celebration is reputed to be one of the largest Veterans Day celebrations in the country, a tradition entering its 45th year. This past year, hundreds of people stood for hours in cold, pouring-down rain to cheer and wave as veterans, honor guards and bands moved through town. Vietnam veteran Lewis White, past president of the Linn County Veterans Council, which sponsors that event, said, "I was overwhelmed by the turnout. I kept saying to people, 'Thank you, thank you.' But they kept saying to me as a veteran, 'No, we thank you!'"**

**Other communities commemorate the day simply in small personal celebrations, rituals, or moments of remembrance.**

**Whatever the form of commemoration on this day, Veterans Day is set aside to honor our veterans. But who are those veterans? That is the second question to ask. "What exactly is a**



**veteran?" Here again you may be surprised at the answers you get. Here are some of the answers we got in our survey:**

- **"A veteran is someone who fought in a war on foreign soil."**

- **"A veteran is anyone who fought in one of the world wars or in Korea or Vietnam or the Gulf. I'm not sure if we count Panama or Somalia."**

- **"A veteran is someone who served in the military."**

**Many people do think of veterans as individuals who fought in a war. That is one part of one definition - "someone who served in time of war." Sometimes we think only to honor those veterans who actually fought in a war. We certainly should honor them. They paid the ultimate sacrifice of putting their life on the line and of facing the horrors of war. They saw their comrades die around them and possibly suffered injury that continues to affect them today. They deserve our honor and our thanks.**

**But let us not forget all of the other veterans who served in time of war. Let us not forget those who might not have stepped foot on foreign soil - the many veterans who supported the fighters. Listen to the words of Staff Sergeant Greg Markley, who served at Fort McClellan, Alabama, during Operation Desert Storm:**

**"I greatly admire and respect my heroes and friends in the desert for their courage, stamina and superb performance during the Storm. Yet, let's not be ashamed of, or even discount in some small way, the accomplishments of all of us who stayed back in the garrisons and training fields in America. We also served, yet in ways that don't grab headlines. We kept on doing what we are paid to do: training soldiers. We played a critical role in caring for the families left behind. We helped ensure that thousands of Guard and Reserve soldiers were fit to fight. We took on the rear-area workload, which needed to be done right."**

**To Sergeant Markley and all the other veterans who served in time of war, we are here today to honor you, too, and to thank you.**

**We are also here to honor those who fall into the other definition of veteran: "all persons who have served in the armed forces," for they have agreed to put their lives on the line - should their nation ask that of them. As we have seen in places like Mogadishu and Bosnia, sometimes service in the armed forces ends in loss of life, even in "operations short of war" such as humanitarian assistance and peacekeeping.**

**We honor veterans for the many sacrifices they make during peacetime. Today, those sacrifices have increased as the numbers of our military have decreased. Even though one big threat - the Soviet Union - has gone away, many volatile smaller threats have taken its place in our world. Operational deployments have increased over 300 percent since 1989. On any given day, over**

**21,500 soldiers are deployed from their home stations to countries around the world. The amount of time deployed yearly averages 138 days for soldiers in operational units - and even more for soldiers in certain specialized units such as military police, civil affairs, and engineers. We currently have 20,000 soldiers deployed to Bosnia for one year in support of Operation Joint Endeavor -- the longest deployment for U.S. forces since the Vietnam War. At the same time, we maintain about 125,000 soldiers in Europe, Panama and the Pacific.**

**As President Clinton said in an address to U.S. troops in Haiti, "Whether you serve in an active unit, the reserves or the National Guard, we ask you to bear many burdens. We ask you to travel far from home. We ask you to stand in the face of danger. We ask you to be away from your families and your friends for a very long time."**

**We do indeed ask great sacrifice from those of you who serve in our armed forces. Today we are here to honor and thank you for your sacrifice - your service - which has made such a great difference in our world.**

**And that brings us to our third question: Why do we honor our veterans? Here are some of the responses:**

- **"We honor them for putting their lives in danger for our country."**

- **"We honor them for helping to keep America free."**

- **"As soldiers, we honor veterans because we really appreciate the magnitude of their sacrifice. We hope that our service lives up to their expectations and that they can be proud of what we accomplish today."**

- **"We honor them for making a difference."**

**We do indeed honor veterans for the sacrifices they make to keep our nation - and other nations - free. We do indeed honor veterans for making a difference in our country, and in many other countries as well.**

**The ways veterans have made a difference are many and varied. The winning of wars to stop aggression is the most dramatic and visible.**

**On television, we saw very vividly how veterans made a difference when we watched the fall of the Berlin Wall, a sign that the Cold War was coming to an end. As General John Shalikashvili, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has said, "It can be argued that the greatest victory for human rights the world has ever witnessed was the peaceful termination of the Cold War. For in that termination, billions of the world's people were released from near slavery and oppression."**

**Our veterans played a key role in making that happen.**

**We watched as veterans fed starving people in Somalia and upheld democratic principles in Haiti. We watch now as they are maintaining the peace in war-torn Bosnia. We honor them for making a difference in these areas.**

**But there are many other ways that veterans have made and are making a difference today that may not be as dramatic or well known.**

**Throughout Europe and in the United States, in major military exercises, in many small teams, and often one on one, soldiers are helping to solidify peace through Partnership for Peace initiatives. In one exercise at Fort Polk, Louisiana, platoons from 14 nations - including Albanians, Bulgarians, Czechs, Hungarians, Poles and Rumanians - participated in a joint peacekeeping exercise. In such countries as Rumania, Latvia, Lithuania and Bulgaria, our soldiers are showing their counterparts how the military functions in a democracy. At the Marshall Center in Garmisch, Germany, former**

**Soviet and Warsaw Pact officers are being introduced to the practices of a democracy. As Defense Secretary Perry has said, "Partnership for Peace is restructuring the whole security picture in Europe and building new bonds of cooperation and trust among nations. "**

**New bonds of cooperation and trust are being built by soldiers in other parts of the world as well. In Los Andes, Chile, soldiers from the 5th Battalion, 87th Infantry, trained with the Chilean army in a platoon exchange program. As Second Lieutenant Scott Stover said of that experience, "Our mission was not only to train, but to further relations between our countries and to make friends as well."**

**Since 1984, Joint Task Force Bravo has supported humanitarian missions, medical-training missions and regional cooperative-security programs in Honduras. Soldiers have built roads, schools, and health clinics, and they have drilled wells.**



**As then-commander of the task force, Colonel Larry Grego, said, Joint Task Force Bravo was born to "further demonstrate United States resolve and commitment to our friends in this part of the world, and to try to stabilize some of the situations."**

**Veterans have made and are making, a difference in countries throughout the world. And they are making a difference here at home.**

**Ask veterans about their military experiences and you will hear stories about fighting fires in the Pacific Northwest; aiding, flood victims in the South, the Midwest, and the Northwest; and providing relief supplies, logistical support, and hospitals to areas hit by hurricanes. Veterans will tell you of working with federal, state and local law-enforcement agencies in counterdrug activities, and of taking part in anti-terrorism operations at the Summer Olympics in Atlanta.**

**They will tell you about providing health care to underserved populations through the Army National Guard's Operation Guard Care program, and of delivering medical supplies and providing transportation support during the Blizzard of '96 in 13 states and the District of Columbia.**

**They might tell you about helping to evacuate injured passengers from a train derailment in Arizona, or clearing debris in New Hampshire after a dam broke. They might tell you about their work with the Army Civil Works Program, producing 25 percent of our nation's hydropower, and providing water to about 10 million people.**

**There are things, too, they might forget to tell you. They might forget to tell you the difference veterans are making in our Junior ROTC programs, teaching our youth patriotism and leadership skills and responsibility. They might not tell you about the many hours of volunteer time they put in.**

**Veterans like First Sergeant Jose Garcia Apponte and dozens of others in Haiti who, on their own time and with no pay, started the School of Hope to teach the English language to Haitians.**

**Veterans like Sergeant First Class Lewis Mikulecky, who earned the Army Volunteer Service Medal; he earned it for giving 80 hours of his own time each month to serve as a firefighter and an emergency medical team technician with the local fire department.**

**Veterans like Captain Bradford Byrnes, who, through the Literacy Council, spends two hours twice a week teaching a Cuban refugee family how to read English.**

**Veterans do make a difference. Today, on Veterans Day, we honor them for their service, for their sacrifice,, and for making a difference in our world.**

**Let me ask all veterans here today to please stand for a moment, or raise your hands if you cannot stand.**

**Please look around you. I think you will see the variety of veterans I just spoke of. Talk to them today while you have the opportunity. You will probably hear that wide variety of service and experience I just described. Veterans, we honor you, and we thank you for your service.**

**I thank the rest of you for coming here today to honor our veterans. I challenge you to ask those same three questions of your family, friends and neighbors when you return home: What does Veterans Day mean to you? What exactly is a veteran? Why do we honor our veterans? You just might be surprised at the answers.**

**What better way to spend Veterans Day than to discuss those answers? What better way to spend Veterans Day than to tell others how our veterans make the world better? What better way to spend Veterans Day than to honor the contributions of our veterans - those of the past and those of today?**

**Thank you for taking part in Veterans Day 1996.**

***Note to speaker: You can make this speech even more effective by including stories about your local units or service members who have served with distinction in time of war or peace.***