

VETERANS DAY SPEECH 1998

I want to ask all of the veterans with us here today to stand up. Ladies and gentlemen, let's recognize these distinguished Americans. [Speaker leads applause].

Some of our veterans are easy to recognize. They wear uniforms, medals, and ribbons. Most veterans, however, live among us quietly and anonymously. They are America's own sons and daughters. Let's consider for a moment the question, "Who is a veteran?"

A veteran is an elderly gentleman sitting on a park bench, who helped liberate a Nazi concentration camp.

A veteran is the grizzled service station mechanic, who showed extraordinary courage at the 38th parallel.

A veteran is the nurse taking care of newborns in a hospital nursery, who once bandaged burned and bloody limbs at Da Nang.

A veteran is a POW, who once returned home to face a culture he didn't recognize and now finds himself able at last to tell his story to his adult children.

A veteran is a police officer driving her patrol car through the neighborhood, who spent six months in Saudi Arabia making sure armored personnel carriers didn't run out of fuel.

On Veterans Day, we honor all people who served in our Armed Forces. But those of us here today have come to pay special tribute to our military veterans. They stand proudly in the timeline of history. Many war heroes and visionary military leaders stand in this line of selfless service. Some bear visible signs of their bravery and service – a missing limb, a jagged

scar. Others carry inner signs – a pin holding a bone together; a piece of shrapnel in the leg. Perhaps the steel inside is part of a soldier’s character, a soul forged and shaped by battle.

Today, we offer special recognition to veterans who faced the horrors of war, and especially those who gave up their lives in service to the nation. They and their families deserve our highest praise and eternal gratitude. We remember and salute all fallen heroes today and thank their families for their ultimate sacrifice.

But a “veteran” is not only someone who fought in a war. Listen to the words of a staff sergeant who served during 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 discount the accomplishments of all 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.”

These are powerful words, and true ones. And let's not forget to honor the many other veterans who served during peacetime and those who deployed during operations other than war.

All military personnel commit to putting their lives on the line. As we saw in Mogadishu, Somalia, and at the American Embassy at Nairobi, Kenya, soldiers die in operations other than war. All soldiers train and maintain a constant state of readiness

so that whenever the nation needs them, they are ready to serve and, if necessary, to fight and die for their country.

Therefore, on Veterans Day, we recognize and honor the many veterans who supported our warfighters as well as all soldiers who served during peacetime. We recognize the fullest possible definition of the term ‘veteran’ as “any person who has served in the armed forces: past and present; at home and abroad; in peacetime and in war; and on active duty, in the Military Reserve, and in the State National Guard.” We honor them today, as we have for 79 years.

[History of Veterans Day]

The tradition of honoring America’s veterans began after one hundred sixteen thousand members of our fighting forces died in World War I, a conflict then known as “the Great War” or “the War To End All Wars,” though sadly, that was not to be.

In 1919, President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed November 11 as “Armistice Day.” His intention was to honor the valiant forces who fought and died in one of the most costly and bitter wars ever fought. It was his hope, and the dream of all Americans then, that the world would afterward be “safe for democracy.” A bright dream it was, but sadly, an elusive one, as we now know from history: the need for a strong fighting force emerged again and again in the decades following the proclamation of the first Armistice Day.

During the first half of our century, Americans clearly understood the importance of honoring those who served. Most American families had personal experiences with the Military. They or members of their families served in the Armed Forces. Some volunteered, and others were drafted into service. In

1954, Congress broadened the scope of the national holiday honoring our military and renamed it “Veterans Day.”

[Veterans Day]

A superb all-volunteer Military now proudly serves our nation and has done so since 1973. However, the number of Americans with military service is declining. Today, we have the smallest Military in over 50 years. Unlike past periods in our history, many members of Congress have not served in the military. In times of economic prosperity, fewer young people view the Military as their best opportunity to advance.

Americans unfamiliar with the proud history of their Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps and Coast Guard often have little or no familiarity with the contributions of these service personnel. Hard as it might be to believe, many Americans today have never met a member of the Military.

Therefore, it is time for those of us who do not understand the importance of the Military, who do know what it means to serve, who do know the quality and character of the American soldier firsthand – to help re-connect the American soldier to the American people. It is important to make all Americans aware of the contributions and importance of their Military, to tell soldier stories.

Here are some facts about our Armed Forces:

Today's Military is a full spectrum force, the best Force in the world, able to fight and win wars and to stand firm for peace as the insurers of global stability. All of our service personnel are trained and ready to deploy and perform their missions during the nation's wars when called upon to do so. In addition to maintaining battlefield readiness and upholding the United States Military's long term commitments worldwide, our sons

and daughters are performing numerous vital and diverse missions at home and abroad.

Today, the line of selfless service stretches around the globe. During the past year, our Armed Forces have deployed to over 100 countries. Over 100,000 soldiers have been stationed in foreign lands.

At this time, there are about 20,000 American soldiers deployed to more than 80 countries, as part of joint and combined operations and exercises.

In Europe, more than 7,000 American soldiers are deployed in Bosnia, Hungary, Italy, and Croatia, in support of Operation Joint Forge. In enforcing the Dayton Peace Accord, they are nurturing fledgling democracies in post Cold War Europe and helping to rebuild villages ripped apart by civil wars. Validating these efforts are the recent peaceful elections

in that region, a result of close relationships built between American soldiers and local officials and citizens.

Also in Europe, soldiers are helping to solidify peace through Partnership for Peace initiatives. In Romania and Latvia, in Lithuania and Bulgaria, our soldiers are showing the armies of these nations how a 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.

In Africa, our soldiers are part of the African Crisis Response Initiative, a training plan to prepare African military units to support limited peacekeeping or humanitarian relief operations on their continent.

In Asia, soldiers are helping to heal a wounded past by taking part in Joint Task Force Full Accounting, an effort to

determine the fate of members of our armed forces killed or missing in action in Vietnam and Cambodia.

At various locations worldwide, soldiers are working as part of humanitarian de-mining operations. Their goal is to help prevent further deaths and maimings of innocent people, many of them children, who are present victims of past conflicts.

In Latin America, as part of Joint Task Force Bravo, our soldiers have supported humanitarian missions in Honduras since 1984. They are building trust and cooperation through medical training missions and regional cooperative security programs. Soldiers drill wells and build roads, schools, and health clinics. In Haiti, veterans, on their own free time and with no pay, started the School of Hope to teach English to Haitians.

At home, veterans perform vital missions during disasters. Ask them what they've done in the past couple of years. In the Pacific Northwest and in Florida, soldiers in the Army Reserve or the Army National Guard will talk about fighting fires. In the Midwest, soldiers will speak of aiding flood victims and providing relief supplies and logistical support. In the South, they will talk about helping during and after hurricanes.

In New England and upstate New York, veterans will speak of delivering medical supplies, transportation support, and emergency power during the Winter Storm of '98. Nationwide, 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.

Veterans are also making a difference in our Junior ROTC programs, teaching our young people about patriotism,

leadership skills, and responsibility. Veterans volunteer as firefighters and emergency medical technicians and work in literacy programs.

[Military Core Values]

What is it that inspires and enables ordinary citizens to rise to the challenge of battle, to be willing to make the ultimate sacrifice of their lives in service to their country? What is it that motivates them to respond and contribute wherever and whenever they are called upon to do so? The answer is contained within a single concept: core values. The proud legacy of our fighting Force is grounded in these values:

Loyalty: the code of the American serviceman and woman is to bear true faith and allegiance to the U.S. Constitution, their branch of service, the unit, and to their comrades in arms.

Duty: the code of the American serviceperson is to fulfill obligations;

Respect: the code of the American serviceperson is to treat people as they should be treated;

Selfless-Service: the code of the American serviceperson is to put the welfare of the nation, before his or her own;

Honor: the code of the American serviceperson is to live up to all of the Military's values;

Integrity: the code of the American serviceperson is to do what's right, legally and morally;

Personal Courage: the code of the American serviceperson is to face fear, danger, or adversity, whether physical or moral.

Today, these values are the cornerstone of all training our military personnel receive and the standard against which behavior is measured. These are the same values that shaped

our Military at Valley Forge, at Normandy, on Iwo Jima, the sands of Kuwait, in the streets of Mogadishu, and at checkpoints in Bosnia. Values are the American soldiers' credentials, just as our soldiers are America's credentials, both at home and around the globe.

So when you leave here today, go out and spread the word. Tell your stories to your family, friends, co-workers, and neighbors. Contact your local news media when you hear a "soldier story" that deserves a wider telling. In doing so, you can help reconnect the American people with their Armed Forces. In doing so, you are helping re-connect them with their legacy, with America's proud history. That history and the United States Military's are one and inseparable.

We owe all American veterans a profound debt of gratitude. And in particular, we pay tribute to our

Commonwealth veterans. The freedoms and opportunities we enjoy today were bought and paid for with their devotion to duty and their sacrifices. Future global stability depends on them.

To all of our veterans we say, “Your contributions and acts of selfless service make a profound difference in our world. We praise you, we honor you, and we thank you.”