

*Rep. Paul Semmel
Firefighter speech
October 14, 2001*

Thank you (whoever introduced you)

Good (morning, afternoon).

President Reagan once said that “television has more power than any of us know.”

Television during the past month has displayed its awesome power by bringing into our homes, schools and offices the tragedy of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks that shook the United States and the world, and now the following American counterattacks.

One thing is certain. The events of Sept. 11 have forever changed the fabric of America. Thousands of innocent Americans slaughtered on American soil... Our very way of life threatened in a way we could have hardly imagined... Our resolve as a nation tested, perhaps, like never before.

In this fast-paced, electronically connected world of the 21st century, I believed Americans had been fully stripped of their innocence. In the past century we had suffered, survived and triumphed over two world wars; been torn apart by an unpopular war which we could not win, as well as by internal racial strife from which we are still healing.

With our heritage in hard work, energy and drive, we have projected this great country into an unprecedented role as the leader of the free world. We have made huge strides in life-saving medicine and science; taken men to the moon and back; and made the world and all of its knowledge accessible to people everywhere through the Internet and a state-of-the art worldwide communications network.

As the country has flexed its muscles during this growth spurt, its people have also grown, matured, become more sophisticated, perhaps more brazen, perhaps more jaded, certainly more driven – in other words, more worldly and no longer as innocent and trusting as we once were.

But it appears we were wrong. The events of Sept. 11 have put all our previous successes – and failures – into better perspective. That was the day America truly lost its innocence. That was the day we realized that the war of terrorism has no boundaries, has no rules.

As we gather here today, we honor the courageous and selfless heroes from New York City, Washington, D.C. and around the nation who risked their lives in rescue and relief efforts.

Although I never like to begin my remarks on a negative note, I think it is an appropriate time for a moment of silence in honor of the brave men and women who lost and continue to risk their lives in the service of others.

PAUSE

It is truly an honor for me to be here today. I enjoy speaking to emergency workers because your work is important and I sometimes believe the state does not sufficiently recognize or pay tribute to you.

Your service and dedication in this community is invaluable. With over 80 percent of the state's firefighters and emergency personnel being volunteer, it is vital that we strive to keep our volunteer emergency service providers viable and maintain an environment, which promotes and encourages your continued service.

I commend each one of you who . . . without thinking twice . . . without hesitation . . . without delay, battle fires and help those in need.

You are always there, willing to drop what you're doing at a moment's notice to serve others whom you may not even know.

You are always there, ready to give up dinner with your family, perhaps a peaceful night's sleep, or leave an important job unfinished at your workplace. It is you who are always there risking your lives for others.

The bottom line is that every volunteer in this room is a hero. We all benefit from their dedication and willingness to risk their own safety to protect ours.

It is important that we remember that.

Firefighters affect lives with the response to a pager, with every sound siren. Each firefighter knows this call could be a matter of life and death. Each call could mean the loss of all the property someone owns ... prized possessions such as a wedding album or a child's favorite toy.

I know it's a tough job. I salute every one of you for the commitment and compassion you bring to this dangerous work.

PAUSE

Our prayers and our hearts go out to all of the innocent victims, and to their families, whose lives have been shattered by the events of Sept 11. They have been personally affected by this horrific catastrophe. But, in a very real sense, we all have been profoundly affected by this American tragedy.

As hard as it may be to admit, life may never be the same again for any of us. Many of us will be inconvenienced at workplaces, airports, schools and other public events.

Our collective and personal emotions since Sept. 11 have ranged from shock, disbelief, anger, hatred, fear and depression. We have grieved and sought revenge. It's been an incredibly stressful time for all Americans and there are still many difficult days ahead of us.

Make no mistake, however, we will face serious emotional, physical and economic challenges in the weeks, months and years ahead as we undertake a war against evil.

I am confident that we will ultimately prevail in what will be a very different war – a war where winning will be difficult to define. Through the years ahead – as was the case in other times when our national resolve was tested – our unity will sustain us.

Those who perpetrated the astonishing destruction have already seen a united America begin to deal with this unprecedented catastrophe. There was a deluge of volunteers to the disaster locations, a surge of those willing to donate blood and open their pocketbooks for Red Cross and other disaster relief efforts.

In our darkest hours, America has always rallied around a common and profound purpose. Our purpose now is to support a war against the shadowy enemy of terrorism. We must suppress this enemy, not just for the well-being of our nation, but also for the well-being of the entire human race.

I commend each and every one of you who risk your lives every day to make our world a little safer and to help those in need.

God Bless America.

Thank you.