

**The  
American  
Legion**



*For God and Country*

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# **VETERANS DAY SPEECH 2008**

The American Legion  
Public Relations Division  
October 2008

We say “thank you” when a store clerk hands us change. We wave “thank you” when a motorist yields us the right of way. We thank our friends when they pay us compliments. If you think about it, we probably use the words “thank you” or some variation of it at least a dozen times a day. But how do you thank someone for saving the world?

When you ask young men and women to endure great hardships, drastically change their lifestyles and possibly give their lives for you – the words “thank you,” seem woefully insufficient.

Simply put, we owe them a debt that can never be re-paid.

Fortunately, veterans don’t ask for much. Benefits are a mere drop in the bucket compared to the financial and human cost of war. But, nonetheless, we still owe them.

Many of us recall President Lincoln's famous promise from his second inaugural address "to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow, and his orphan."

But do you know that the seed for that promise may not have been planted by our 16<sup>th</sup> president but by his 10-year-old son Willie?

In her book Team of Rivals, historian Doris Kearns Goodwin writes of the close bond that Colonel Edward Baker formed with the Lincoln family. One day in 1861, as he was leaving the White House grounds to head off to battle, Col. Baker shook the president's hand, lifted young Willie off the ground and kissed him goodbye. Within 24 hours the Lincolns received word that Col. Baker was killed at Ball's Bluff.

Heartbroken, Willie composed a short poem, “*On the death of Colonel Edward Baker,*” which was published in the *National Republican*.

“His country has her part to play,  
To’rds those he has left behind,  
His widow and his children all, --  
She must always keep in mind.”

Tragically, Willie himself lost his life a few months later to typhoid. But in his short life the young boy understood the meaning of a veteran’s sacrifice and what is owed by a grateful nation.

In his acceptance speech at The American Legion’s National Convention, Commander David K. Rehbein (Ray Bine) spoke of pride and purpose.

He reflected on the purpose that World War I veterans felt when they came home from Europe 90 years ago, understanding that they had stood beside their comrades in the trenches of war and needed to continue to stand beside them as they re-adjusted to society.

“That purpose will stay alive because our comrades will always need us,” National Commander Rehbein said.

The American Legion exists because 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.

Most veterans will also say that the military has made them better Americans. Marco Martinez, for instance, says he was a 17-year-old thug, a self-described “gun-toting, car-stealing gang member.” Yet, he credits the United States Marine Corps for turning his life around.

After his squad leader in Iraq was wounded, Corporal Martinez took control and led an assault through a treeline where the ambush originated. For his actions, Corporal Martinez was awarded the Navy Cross, the second-highest honor a Marine could receive.

Corporal Martinez's award citation states, "Enduring intense enemy fire and without regard for his own personal safety, Corporal Martinez launched a captured enemy rocket propelled grenade into the building temporarily silencing the enemy and allowing a wounded Marine to be evacuated and receive medical treatment. After receiving additional fire, he single-handedly assaulted the building and killed four enemy soldiers with a grenade and his rifle.

By his outstanding display of decisive leadership, unlimited courage in the face of heavy enemy fire, and utmost devotion to duty, Corporal Martinez reflected great credit upon himself and upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service.”

Not all veterans have seen war, but a common bond that they share is an oath in which they expressed their willingness to die defending this nation.

The greatest wars are the battles that America does not have to fight because those who wish us harm slink away in fear of the Coast Guard cutter, the Navy aircraft carrier or the Army soldier on patrol.

While we are happy to be here today to express our appreciation for our veterans, true appreciation is expressed through deeds – not words.

When an airman-turned-job-applicant sits across from you during an interview, weigh that experience a little heavier than most.

When an American Legion Auxiliary member asks for a donation for a poppy, remember the Korean War veteran in a hospital bed.

When a member of Congress complains about the cost of a veterans program, remind the lawmaker of the cost of being a veteran.

And, as young Willie Lincoln reminded us, we must never forget their families.

We must honor these families not just with Blue and Gold Star Banners, but with open hearts. Help the busy mother of two with her yard work, while her husband is fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Support The American Legion Legacy  
Scholarship Fund so children can receive educations  
in the event their father or mother lose their lives  
during military service.

And, perhaps most important of all, thank today's  
servicemembers for the sacrifices that they are  
making for America, as well.

In the words of the great poet Walt Whitman,  
“The moon gives you light,  
And the bugles and the drums give you music,  
And my heart, O my soldiers, my veterans,  
My heart gives you love.”

God bless you all for being here, God bless our  
veterans and God bless America.

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