



Patrick F. Leahy

Veterans Day Celebration | November 11, 2016

On the 11th hour of the day, on the 11th day of the month, in the 11th month of each year, we pause as a nation to remember the nearly 24 million American men and women — past and present — who have served our nation in uniform and to thank them for their service to our country.

In this year — 2016 — it is particularly fitting that we gather for this ceremony this week, following a national election day. This year's election exposed just how deeply divided we can be as a nation. But no holiday should unite us as Americans like Veterans Day. This is a day when we stop to thank these brave men and women who fight to ensure that we have free and fair elections, however contentious they might be. Today is a day when I hope we can put our political differences aside and recall those values that unite us as Americans. And today, Veterans Day, all of us Americans should take a moment to thank the members of our armed forces for protecting these values.

And what a debt of gratitude we owe our veterans!

Not too long after World War I — the war that was supposed to end all wars — the world went to war again, and a generation of Americans responded, at home and abroad, to preserve our American way of life. World War II vets are known as the Greatest Generation for their extraordinary service to our nation. And they were. Their sacrifices set the standard for the world.

But fortunately, the United States of America has had generation after generation of greatness.

When war broke out on the Korean Peninsula, the first armed conflict of the Cold War, a generation of Americans responded, despite being war-weary from World War II.

When troops were needed in Vietnam to stem the spread of communism, a new generation of Americans responded, even when their service was often ridiculed at home.

When Iraq invaded Kuwait, the next generation of Americans responded, making it clear once again that naked aggression would not stand in our world.

And when 9/11 happened, yet another generation of Americans responded — and are still responding today — to rid the world of terrorism.

In fact, whenever Americans have been threatened by a foe or summoned by a friend, our American military men and women have responded. Our American veterans continue to make good on President Lincoln's pledge made 153 years ago in this month of November in this state of Pennsylvania that "government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the Earth." All of us Americans owe our rights as a people — our very way of life, however challenging it can sometimes be — to our veterans.

So to all of our nation's veterans, we say thank you. Thank you for your service to our country. Your commitment and your sacrifices are appreciated by all of us Americans, some of us who too often take you and your service for granted. To the veterans assembled here today, we say thank you. To the veteran that I met who served as a medic on Guadalcanal and who had to make split-second decisions regarding whether a wounded serviceman could be saved or not, we say thank you. To the young veteran that I met who lost his eyesight and the use of his limbs from a sniper bullet in Iraq and who said he would do it all over again in defense of the nation he loves, we say thank you. To all of the veterans who serve our country — in ways dramatic and subtle — we say, of course, thank you. Thank you all for the ways you strengthen our United States of America.

To the families of our American veterans — the unsung heroes of our nation — we also say thank you. Your sacrifices will not be forgotten. The family members of our servicemen and women deserve our gratitude today, too. Perhaps there should be a national holiday specifically for you.

To our POWs and MIAs, the ultimate fate of which is known only to God himself, we say thank you. Your sacrifices will never be forgotten.

To the half a million men and women who since World War II have made the ultimate sacrifice of their lives in defense of our freedom, we say thank you. This includes Wilkes alumnus Neil Dadurka, who, when he could've ejected from his crippled plane, instead stayed with his plane and directed it to vacant fields, dying in the process and saving hundreds of lives in the process. Their stories have been written to their conclusions, and they should be told forever.

To all of these groups on this Veterans Day 2016, we say as simply and as sincerely as we can — thank you. But as President Kennedy said: "As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them."

Let us all — military and civilian alike — take some personal responsibility for ensuring that "government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the Earth." May our veterans' acts of selflessness and duty and courage inspire our own acts of selflessness and duty and courage. May their heroism inspire our own heroism.

And may the star-spangled banner wave this Veterans Day — and every day in the future!