

ARTHUR H. WILSON'S REMARKS AT THE AMERICAN VETERANS DISABLED FOR LIFE MEMORIAL DEDICATION

It is humbling to be here on this historic occasion as we dedicate a permanent place of honor for those whose sacrifices and contributions to freedom have ensured the duration of our nation's way of life.

This is the culmination of the hard work, support and vision shared by many. Among them are some dear friends who are here in spirit and watching from above.

We gather in our nation's capital, a place where honor is bestowed upon nearly every cause and history is remembered in bronze and stone from every vantage.

We honor our fallen... We honor every branch and the battles and the bold... **But until this day**, we have not remembered those who lived and whose lives were forever changed by the sacrifices they made in uniform.

And yet, without their stories and the experiences of their loved ones, we as a people cannot know the true cost of war.

Without acknowledging their sacrifices, we forget the courage that ensures our freedom and the promises we make with those who defend our land.

The experiences etched on these walls remind us that, for those who serve and their families, wars often continue long after the final bullet is fired. The most difficult fight often begins after an injury is sustained.

That includes people like Felecia Weston. On February 26, 1991, while serving as an Army Radio Operator in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, a scud missile struck the barracks adjacent to hers. Some 27 soldiers

lost their lives that day. Specialist Weston was among the nearly 100 wounded.

Though partially blinded by the attack, she recounts the bewildering feeling of helplessness.

“I felt so alone, watching what was happening. By this point, I knew I’d been hurt, but I just wanted to find someone from my company,” she said.

The purpose of this memorial is to honor those changed by war and to show them that they are never alone.

As the words of my dear friend the late Jesse Brown remind us, “For every tragic story of a life unraveled by military battle, there are a dozen tales of individuals who have managed to triumph over the harrowing experiences of war and ruin.”

The story of people like Felecia Weston does not end with the destruction war brought to their persons. It instead shows a beginning. It reminds us – in granite and glass...in fire and water – of the hope and gratitude they have earned.

Many on these walls have done much more than survive the war. They have lit a path for their brothers and sisters to follow. Though the bandages and debris were removed from Felecia Weston’s eyes, the visions of terror from that day were not.

The invisible wounds she faced took years of intensive recovery and may never fully heal. Yet instead of distancing herself from military service, she has dedicated more than 15 years of her life providing direct advocacy for her fellow veterans – ensuring they have someone they can count upon.

Bobby Barrera, who was in an armored personnel carrier in Vietnam when a “command detonated mine” – better known today as an “I E D” was detonated under his vehicle.

His fellow Marines pulled him from the fiery wreckage, but not before he suffered burns over much of his body which resulted in the loss of his right hand and left arm.

Like many here today, Bobby had a choice to make. He could succumb to despair, or find a new direction.

When he made the choice to live, he decided to dedicate each moment to making the world a better place.

With his wife Maricelia by his side, he tackled his education and became a counselor serving the Department of Defense. He became involved in veterans service organizations and rose through the ranks to become National Commander of Disabled American Veterans.

“I have a purpose in life, and that's been to help other military families through some of what I had to go through,” Bobby’s words will tell generations. “If I had to go through it myself in order to help others, I'm okay with that.”

These walls represent veterans of multiple eras and conflicts. Those who are represented give voice to the many who are part of a nationwide community of intergenerational heroes.

They include men like Army Sgt. Jason Pepper. Deployed to Iraq, his last memories as he dove on two of his soldiers to cover them from a rocket-propelled grenade attack was that he would never see his wife and child again.

While he would survive, his last thoughts proved to be prophetic. The blast cost him his vision. In spite of his injuries, he has pursued his education and is planning to start a business. Though he may never actually see his first-born daughter, he and his wife Heather have added two more children to their growing family.

In a sense, veterans like Sergeant Pepper and many others have sacrificed one life to their country in service. In an instant, their hopes and dreams for the future are shattered.

But, with the love of their countrymen and support of their family and community, they rediscover their purpose in life and learn to accept or overcome the obstacles their injuries impose.

These walls remind us too that a sacrifice made on behalf of our nation is most often shared with the loved ones who care for our injured heroes.

Every individual dream changed by disability reverberates to the families, survivors and communities on whom our wounded rely for support, care and advocacy.

We are, it appears, disentangling ourselves from more than a dozen years of war. In that time, we have sent our sons and daughters into a battlefield with no fronts but with imminent dangers.

These may be the first wars on record where our society has not fully experienced the mobilization of the era. Our nation has become so great – so prosperous – that we can send our armies to fight two wars without any type of rationing or demand to change the lifestyles of the general public.

We have created the best military in the history of the world. We have given our fighting men and women the best arms and done our utmost to ensure every soul that deploys comes home.

And though the capabilities of our forces are great and their valor is unquestioned, the toll that war has taken on their bodies and hearts and minds is a timeless reminder of the need for this memorial. For as long as we as a nation have sent our young to fight, we have entered into a promise with them.

As we drafted and enlisted them into our military, we made a sacred pledge.

This is our greatest social contract: that the men and women we send into harm's way will be made whole should they become ill or injured in service... That they should enjoy the Dream they fought to

defend... That their survivors should see a future that remembers the fallen.

Without this agreement, it would be inconceivable to ask our young to be willing to fight and die for our country. And without their doing so, our ideals as a nation; our freedom; and prosperity would not exist. This obligation, etched here in stone to recall the deepest sentiments of our Founding Father, George Washington, is what brings us together here today “to behold those who have shed their blood or lost their limbs in service of their country.”

This obligation to care for our injured servicemen and women, first proclaimed by General Washington in 1783, is perhaps the highest form of public justice.

As we stand in sight of our nation’s capital, the centerpiece of our democracy, we must fervently pray that the price paid by our nation’s heroes will be remembered by those we have elected to represent us. We must pray that our obligations to veterans remain a commitment that goes above partisanship – and that they remember those for whom the battle continues.

We must ask the heavens, as they ascend into the halls of power -- and walk those grand steps -- that they look to their west at this sacred ground and remember the promises we’ve made to those who served.