

**Remarks by Adm. Mike Mullen
Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff
2008 USO World Gala
Marriot Wardman Park Hotel
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Well, good evening to all.

Everyone here gets to take that precious resource of time and choose how to use it. All of you have taken time tonight to spend at a special event, recognizing a very special outfit and honoring so many who have served, not only here, but around the world.

I'd also like to say the President is able to make the same choices, and I am extremely grateful that he would spend time with us here tonight.

We are so fortunate to have him as a leader of all who serve. There is no one, I believe, in our country who cares more, who gives more, who thinks more, who is a stronger supporter than all of those who serve, and their families, than our President. And I am grateful.

I'd like to ask for one more round of applause for all our military honorees tonight. They are truly some of the finest young men and women in the armed forces today, and we are all extraordinarily proud of them.

I feel privileged -- humbled, really -- to be here in the company of such men and women and in support of such a great organization like the USO.

I remember as a junior officer aboard a destroyer in the Pacific, a long, long time ago -- longer than I'd like to admit, quite frankly -- looking for that familiar USO sign whenever we pulled into port, whether that port belonged to the United States or not.

It seemed as though the USO was everywhere and anywhere we were, that the volunteers were not just serving us they were serving alongside us.

And so it is today, and so it is tonight.

Right now, as we gather here in this beautiful setting, in black tie and gown, to enjoy a good meal and fellowship, the sun is nearing dawn in Baghdad and it has already cast its morning shadows in Kandahar and Kabul and Baghram.

Our troops are beginning another day on the front lines, another day of sacrifice and service, another day of hard work on behalf of the American people.

Some of them may lose a limb doing that work. Some of them may lose their lives.

All of them and their families will be forever changed by it.

Scarred or scared, encouraged or more mature, those who make it home will make it best at home only with our continued support -- the kind of support the USO has been providing for 67 years now, the kind of support that only an organization like this whose volunteers serve also on those front lines, can truly provide.

The USO really is everywhere and anywhere we are, and that includes in harm's way.

So, on behalf of every man and woman in uniform today, as well as their families, I want to thank the volunteers of the USO for everything you do to make everything we do possible.

I would be remiss, indeed, if I did not also pause to recognize Diane and Ned Powell, who leave the organization after nearly seven years of tremendous leadership. And they leave the organization better than when they found it.

If there's another couple more devoted to our troops, I don't know of them. Thank you both for your selflessness, and thank you for your service.

Now, we just honored some terrific and well-deserving young people, who, as I said, represent the very best of our armed forces. But I believe, and I think they would agree with me, that in their service and in their desire to do good, these awardees typify the quality and the character of every one of their fellow Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, Airmen and Coast Guardsmen.

All of them are special. All of them are heroes in their own right. All of them are dedicated to something larger than themselves and that dedication itself motivates and inspires.

I had the opportunity to take a group of entertainers on a USO Holiday tour last year. The headliner was Mr. Robin Williams, who was then on his fourth USO trip.

We had a great group with us for that tour: Robin and Lewis Black, Kid Rock, Lance Armstrong and Miss USA. We even had Irish tenor Ronan Tynan.

It was an experience none of us will ever forget, but one moment stands out.

There at Camp Arifjan in Kuwait, our second performance of the trip, Robin was up onstage and in the middle of his routine.

He was on fire, the crowd laughing hysterically, when all of a sudden the bugle called “Attention to Colors.”

In an instant, every one of the nearly one thousand people in the audience fell silent, did a crisp about face, stood at attention and saluted the flag their backs to the stage.

When the colors came down and the “Carry On” call sounded, we all turned around to see a speechless and obviously stunned Robin Williams.

And that’s something you don’t see everyday.

I’ll never forget the look on his face.

It wasn’t shock or even surprise, well maybe a little surprise.

It was respect.

He recovered quickly, of course, saying, “Well, that’s never happened before. Here I am in the middle of a great bit and the audience says, ah-ha not so fast.”

But he knew. Robin knew that those troops were just doing what they do every day at bases and camps and on ships all over the world.

They salute the flag. They answer the call. They defend the American people, first and foremost. And they never, ever, let anything get in the way of that, not even a great show by Robin Williams.

And yet the troops need those shows. They need that support every bit as much as they did when Bob Hope went to Europe and Korea and Vietnam.

It isn't just a taste of home, though that's part of it. It's a sense of appreciation. It's knowing that the people you fight for are back home fighting for you, too.

That's what tonight is all about people who don't just support the troops but who also fight for the troops, like Volunteer Mary Nelson Adams, who will be recognized later this evening.

And Senator John Warner, a venerable American patriot who has fought for men and women in uniform his entire life.

As I said, I am humbled to be here and to represent those troops and their families.

To all of you who fight for them, to the thousands of volunteers, the stars, and the everyday heroes who make the USO a place to call home -- thanks not just for serving us the hot coffee and the warm beds, thanks for serving alongside us.

God Bless you all. Thank you very much.