

REMARKS BY
CHAIRMAN OF THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF

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SOLDIERS' ANGELS
SALUTE TO OUR TROOPS GALA

RONALD REAGAN BUILDING & INTERNATIONAL TRADE CENTER,
WASHINGTON, D.C.

WEDNESDAY, OCT. 6, 2008

Thank you for that very kind introduction. What a gathering it is tonight.

Leader Hoyer, Congressman Blunt...Deborah and I want to thank you for uniting us here tonight, on this first Thursday in November - in particular, we thank you for your dedicated leadership.

Your historic support of our men and women who serve is part of what is very special about you as individuals – and as you have led so well in your respective parties – and have not allowed politics to come between you when it comes to supporting those who serve.

And know that for that dedication that we are incredibly appreciative for all you have done – and we thank both of you.

To Patti and Jeff, and all the guests here supporting this charity of hope called Soldiers' Angels, it is indeed a real honor to spend an evening in your company. In your company and the company of the young men and women who are here tonight who serve in our military.

Thank you for inviting us. Thank you for sponsoring such an evening devoted to our heroes.

And thanks for this opportunity to recognize a special group of volunteers who inspire us by their priceless acts of devotion on behalf of the sons and daughters of America.

Truly, you reflect American communities, united in spirit, and action, across thousands of lighted hilltops across our great land.

And to our most distinguished guests of honor, our service members and veterans here tonight, who have served and sacrificed, and returned changed by war.

Who have traveled from our hospitals at Walter Reed, and Bethesda, and so many other homes of care, here tonight.

It is the greatest of pleasures to say, on behalf of the Joint Chiefs and more than 2.2 million of your brothers and sisters in arms, Welcome Home.

Your noble service inspires us. Your love for this nation lifts us.

Tonight, I want to talk about what we have learned and what we are still learning, from each of you.

It is said, a Nation reveals itself by those it honors.

And November is a special month for America, when we honor our veterans, whose courage allows the freedom of choice we just exercised only two days ago.

We honor them with parades booming down boulevards, and silent walks through sacred places.

Like Arlington, and the Pentagon memorial just consecrated in September - vision-places of souls, in this open city and many others, devoted to our national heroes.

It was only twenty years ago, remarkably, when the namesake of this building visited the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, a little more than a mile away.

President Reagan spoke then of the healing touch of what he called “a lesson in living love.”

“Yes, for all of them,” the President continued, “those who came back and those who did not, their love for their families lives. Their love for their buddies on the battlefields and friends back home lives. Their love of their country lives.”

Those memories, those lessons, and that love, lives today.

Deborah and I, and no doubt many of you, who grew up and served in the 60's and 70's, also saw how disconnected our society and our veterans became. And we formed one lesson, in two words, indelibly etched in our minds:

Never again.

I feel that spirit in this room tonight.

Because when we visit our heroes in Walter Reed and Bethesda, or meet families of the fallen during ceremonies in Arlington, or events like this one, we meet the true strength of our Nation.

Yet we have much left to do to show them that we truly understand what price they have paid for all of us, and that indeed it is our shared burden, and not just theirs alone.

Yes, we have vastly improved our GI Bill. Yes, we have created new efficiencies between the Department of Defense and the Veterans Administration.

Yes, we have, no doubt, sent a new sense of urgency down the spines of our governmental organizations.

We have set up task groups and study groups with this charge.

And as so many of you here know so well, the staff of our VA hospitals and military medical facilities provide world-class support. We are still growing that support.

The people who provide that care make us all very proud.

But our war against violent extremism is changing at rapid speed.

And our peacetime processes at home must adapt to meet the realities of that war abroad.

The truth, as of now, is that our support institutions have not yet met the demands of that struggle.

Many times, it is communities and grass-roots organizations like yours, comprising a Sea of Goodwill across the land ...

A sea of compassion which, in so many thoughtful and heroic ways, fills voids no institution could enter.

Not long ago, I was traveling near my hometown, Los Angeles. And one of the veterans I met there said, "I gave 100%, and all I want is 100% in return."

How can we not answer that?

Recent studies suggest that as many as 20 percent of today's troops may suffer from Post Traumatic Stress brought on by combat in Iraq and Afghanistan.

It can difficult to diagnose. Many are understandably wary of the stigma attached to mental health – a problem I believe we can alleviate – through active early detection for everyone, so no one has to raise his or her hand.

Indeed, there are now spouses whom Deborah speaks with, who say their active duty husbands and wives talk about not raising their hand, saying they think they have PTS, because they worry about its impact on their career.

But even when our people ask for help, some are being compelled to go to unreasonable lengths to prove their cases before being referred to treatment.

On that same trip to the West Coast I had a chance to visit the VA hospital in Palo Alto, and I sat down with about 25 or 30 mostly active-duty PTS patients from all the services.

And it really bothered me to see what they had to go through just to get into the program – essentially bottoming out, like they were in an alcoholic or a drug rehab regimen.

I believe we can do better. We must do better.

There is no greater duty than to bind those wounds, both seen and unseen, and restore the losses of our families, who create the fabric of our society.

Those wounds, in many ways, have come to define their lives. They last a lifetime. And so should our care.

Because how well we bind those wounds will, in time, define America.

So my pledge is to provide the best possible care for those who are wounded in combat, their families, and the families of the fallen – for the rest of their lives.

As Deborah and I have found throughout this journey of service together, family readiness is indispensable to combat readiness.

It is our families who teach the value of hard work and the power of dreams.

It is our families who inspire service to a cause greater than themselves.

We would have no national defense without them.

Yes, we have vast resources and riches in this land.

These resources connote privilege. And privilege bears responsibility.

Not just critical responsibilities to our allies and partner nations for mutual defense in an uncertain world.

But also the responsibility to understand and complement the wellsprings of that power: our citizens, our communities, and our families.

One way to understand the power of this love is to look into the eyes of parents like Patti Patton-Bader, her husband, Jeff, and so many volunteers from Soldiers' Angels here tonight.

It's an amazing story of how Patti and this charity began, in Pasadena, CA, supporting their two sons who have served in combat.

Tonight, more than five years later, is the first time many of these volunteer leaders have met face to face.

Because this charity, like so many others across America, began with love's quest to fill a need. Using the internet and the phone, Patti discovered a vast network of people who just wanted to give.

The response is incredible. More than 500,000 care packages,

Over 2,700 voice-adaptive laptops to the severely wounded.

Over 15,000 Vet-packs for injured service members at VA hospitals nationwide, filled with items for comfort or entertainment.

Over \$3 million of emergency Funds disbursed...for grocery cards to families, or plane tickets for returning veterans to see loved ones...

More than 1,100 Gold Star families have been adopted, with long-term emotional support, maintaining contact for life.

And much, much more.

So, if you don't mind, I'd like to read a few of the many letters from our service members about the impact of Soldiers' Angels upon their lives:

A letter from Major Chuck Ziegenfuss, who is with us tonight, after he received his voice-adaptive laptop:

Chuck wrote, "It was the first time I felt whole since I'd woken up wounded in Landstuhl."

Another letter from a Naval aviation mechanic: "Would like to thank you for the shipment I received with the coffee pots and sand scarves. It was a blessing being able to work on our aircraft without eating sand."

And another, from a Private First Class: "I'm 19 and I've been in Afghanistan for 6 months, and I have about 6 to 9 more months. You Angels have been the talk of our Forward Operating Base for the longest time."

Finally, from an Army Staff Sergeant: "I am a soldier who has come home from a 15 month deployment! My Angel met me the same day my flight came in. She helped me get a motel the first night and helped me get my car and my new apartmentshe drove 12 hours on her own to meet me ... I have not gained an Angel but a new friend."

If you listen closely to the voices of our veterans, you understand that yes, they all returned from war changed ... but what never changed is this:

They never forgot your generosity. They never forgot the power of opportunity. They never forgot the American dream.

They want a job; they want their kids to go to school; they'd like an education, a career, a home.

They want to make a difference.

It is vital for communities throughout the land to be able to join up – in concert with DOD, VA – so that this dream is still possible for them – for those that sacrificed so much.

But it goes far beyond what government can do.

We must share the burdens of this war – now the longest conflict this nation has faced with an all-volunteer force since the American Revolution.

I am convinced that America's great sea of goodwill can be, in fact, a rising tide ... a tide that could lift every veteran and every family of our wounded and fallen.

It's up to us. Here in this room, and across the land.

I'd like to conclude with a final quote from President Reagan's visit to the Vietnam Memorial twenty years ago:

“And yet if this place recalls all this, both sweet and sad, it also reminds us of a great and profound truth about our nation: that from all our divisions, we have always eventually emerged strengthened.

“Perhaps we are finding that new strength today, and if so, much of it comes from the forgiveness and healing love that our veterans have shown.”

Indeed, the love of these veterans, their families, and those here tonight has, once again, strengthened us.

Your love unites us. It makes us whole.

And it teaches us the true power of the idea that is America.

Thank you, and may God continue to bless this nation, and those who serve it so well.