

Remarks at a Veterans Day Ceremony in Arlington, Virginia
November 11, 2023

Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

My fellow Americans, on this day, 105 years ago, the Great War ended. As news of peace reached the front lines of France, a young American soldier sent a letter home to his parents in Missouri, and I'll quote it. It said, "If only you all could see," he wrote. "Fighting stopped, lanterns shine in every window and door," end of quote.

For those who had fought in this war unlike any war the world had ever seen before, it was a symbol, a reminder that as long as those who stand for freedom, light will always triumph over the darkness.

My fellow Americans, Jill, Vice President Harris, Second Gentleman Emhoff, Secretary McDonough, Secretary Buttigieg is here. Secretary Mayorkas, Acting Secretary Su, Director Haines, Deputy Secretary Hicks, Vice Chairman Grady, and most importantly, our veterans and servicemembers and, equally as important, their families.

We come together today to once again honor the generations of Americans who stood on the front lines of freedom; to once again bear witness to the great deeds of a noble few who risked everything—everything—to give us a better future; those who have always, always kept the light of liberty shining bright across the world: our veterans. That's not hyperbole. Our veterans.

Every year on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month, we gather in this sanctuary of sacrifice to pause, to pay tribute to these patriots of the greatest fighting force in the history of the world. As Commander in Chief, I have no higher honor. As a father of a son who served, I have no greater privilege.

Like it is for so many of you, Veterans Day is personal to Jill and me. On this day, I can still see my son, the attorney general of Delaware, standing ramrod straight as I pinned his bars on him the day he joined the Army National Guard in Delaware. I can still feel the overwhelming pride in Major Beau Biden receiving the Bronze Star, the Legion of Merit, and the Delaware Conspicuous Service Cross.

We miss him. I can still hear my wife Jill, every morning, she'd get up to go to school to teach, praying over her cup of coffee during the year he was deployed to Iraq, and 6 months before that, he was a civilian overseas. And like it was yesterday, I can still hear what he told me when he signed up to serve. I said, "Beau, why?" This is the God's truth. He said, "Dad, it's my duty"—"duty."

That was the code my son lived by and the creed that millions of veterans have followed, from Belleau Woods to Baghdad to Gettysburg to Guadalcanal, from Korea to Kandahar and beyond. Each one linked in a chain of honor that stretches back to our founding days; each one bound by a sacred oath to support and defend. Not a place, not a person, not a President, but an idea: to defend an idea unlike any other in human history. That idea is the United States of America.

We're the only nation in the world—only nation in the world—that's built on an idea. Every other nation is based on things like geography, ethnicity, religion. But we're the only nation built on the idea that we are all—all—created equal, endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights. We haven't always lived up to it, but because of our veterans, because of you, we've never walked away from it.

For throughout the annals of history, whenever and wherever the force of darkness has sought to extinguish the light of liberty, American veterans have been holding the lantern as high as they can for us all.

They were there when a determined band of patriots sparked a revolution, delivering a nation where everyone—everyone—is endowed with certain unalienable rights. They were there when, less than a century later, they gave our Nation a new birth of freedom.

They were there when the forces of fascism brought the fight to the trenches of Europe and the bloody beaches of Normandy. They were there when called upon to face the oppression in the frozen rice paddies of Korea and the sweltering jungles of Vietnam. And they were there when darkness came to our shores, signing up for tour after tour after tour to keep our democracy safe and secure these last two decades.

Folks, as a nation, we owe them. We owe you, not just for keeping the flame of freedom burning during the darkest of moments, but for serving our communities even after they hang up their uniforms, for inspiring the next generation to serve.

We see this at barracks and bases all across America, where young women and men continue to risk their own safety for the safety of their fellow Americans. And we see it around the world in all the countries I've been in when our troops continue to stand with our allies against the forces of tyranny and terrorism.

To this day, wherever the forces of darkness have sought to extinguish the light of liberty, American troops are there. And right by their side are their families. As the English poet John Milton wrote, "They also serve who only stand and wait." "They also serve who only stand and wait."

Our veterans are the steel spine of this Nation. And their families, like so many of you, are the courageous heart. Most Americans will never see the sacrifices that you, as family members, also make. They'll never see those holidays, those birthdays made special even with the empty seat at the dinner table.

They'll never see all the packing and unpacking, readying the family to make another move, needing to move to a new school, a new job for the spouse. They'll never see all those nights spent waiting for word from a loved one deployed overseas because you're not sure.

Too often, your sacrifices go without thanks or without acknowledgment. But we must remember only 1 percent—1 percent—of our society today protects 99 percent of us. One percent. We owe them. We owe you.

So, to all the families across our Nation, to all those who are grieving the loss of a loved one who wore the uniform, to all those with loved ones still missing or unaccounted for, I want to say to you: We see you, we stand with you, and we will not forget.

And just as you have kept the ultimate faith to our country, we will keep the faith with you. As a nation, I've said many times, we have many obligations, but we only have one truly sacred obligation: to prepare those we send into harm's way and to care for them and their families when they return home. It's not an obligation based on party or politics, but on a promise that unites us all.

And together, over the last 3 years, we've worked to make good on that promise, passing more than 30 bipartisan laws to support our veterans and their families, caregivers, and survivors. That includes the PACT Act, one of the most significant laws ever to help millions of veterans who were exposed to toxins and burn pits during their military service, pits the size of football fields that incinerated with the wastes of war: tires, chemicals, jet fuel, and so much more.

Too many of our Nation's warriors have served only to return home to suffer from permanent effects of this poisonous smoke. Too many have died. In the 15 months since I—we wrote and signed the PACT Act, a half a million veterans and their surviving family members have already started receiving benefits. But far, far too many are still not getting what they need, the care they deserve.

That's why I'm proud to announce that any toxin-exposed veteran who served in any conflict outlined in the PACT Act will be able to roll—be able to enroll in VA health care starting March of next year.

We're not stopping there. The past year, we delivered more benefits, processed more claims than ever before in VA history. We expanded resources to end veterans homelessness, end veterans poverty, end the silent scourge of suicide, which is taking more veterans than war is.

We're launching a new initiative to protect veterans from scams, because no one should be defrauded by those they defended, for God's sake.

Through Jill's work and others in Joining Forces, we've also announced the most comprehensive set of actions in our Nation's history to strengthen economic opportunity for military and veteran spouses, caregivers, and survivors.

And this year, as we marked 75 years of a desegregated military, 75 years of women's integration into the military, and 50 years of an All-Volunteer Force, we've doubled down on our efforts to ensure all troops, all veterans get the services they need and that no veteran is denied the honor they earned because they were discharged for being LBTQ+ [LGBTQ+; White House correction].

It matters. It matters to the vet from the State of Delaware who, after years of being homeless, after years of living in a tent made of his own uniforms, finally got a roof over his head.

It matters to the vet in Arkansas, who after answering duty's call on 9/11, after dealing with debilitating posttraumatic stress for years, finally is able to receive tailored mental health care that has changed his life.

It matters to the vet from Utah. After flying mission after mission over burn pits in Iraq, after being diagnosed with cancer at just 23 years of age, he's finally receiving full coverage for his treatment.

It matters.

It matters to the vet from Florida who has been exposed to Agent Orange in Vietnam, after applying and being rejected for benefits four times, finally, as he wrote to me in a letter, quote, "[is] able to get by a little easier now."

Today we gather not only to honor these stories, but the story of all veterans, for it's a story of our Nation at its best, a nation that stands as one to forge a better future for all; a nation that faces down fear, generation after generation; a nation that meets darkness with light again and again and again, no matter how high the cost, no matter how heavy the burden.

Ladies and gentlemen, for nearly 250 years, the sacrifices of many of you sitting in front of me and behind me and those who served have kept our country free and our democracy strong. As that young soldier wrote more than a century ago after World War I ended: "If you only could see. Lanterns shine in every window and door."

Today, we not only see that light of liberty, we live by it. And just like our forebearers, it's on all of us—all of us together—to ask ourselves: What can we do, what must we do to keep that light burning, to keep it shining in every window and door for generations to come?

I know we can. I know we will. Because, as our veterans know best, we are the United States of America. And there's nothing, nothing, nothing beyond our capacity—nothing beyond our capacity—when we do it together.

God bless you all, God bless our veterans, and may God protects our troops today and always.

Thank you. And thank you for your service.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12 p.m. in the Memorial Amphitheater at Arlington National Cemetery. In his remarks, he referred to Acting Secretary of Labor Julie A. Su; Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen H. Hicks; and Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Christopher W. Grady, USN. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on November 13.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Veterans Day ceremony in Arlington, VA.

Locations: Arlington, VA.

Names: Biden, Jill T.; Buttigieg, Peter P.M.; Emhoff, Douglas C.; Grady, Christopher W.; Haines, Avril D.; Harris, Kamala D.; Hicks, Kathleen H.; Mayorkas, Alejandro N.; McDonough, Denis R.; Su, Julie A.

Subjects: Acting Secretary of Labor; Deputy Secretary of Defense; Director of National Intelligence; Homelessness, prevention and reduction efforts; Joint Chiefs of Staff; Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons, equality; Military families; Military spouses, employment and job training support; Secretary of Homeland Security; Secretary of Transportation; Secretary of Veterans Affairs; U.S. servicemembers, environmental exposures in war zones; U.S. servicemembers, service and dedication; Veteran suicide rate; Veterans benefits; Veterans Day; Veterans, health and medical care; Veterans, mental health services, improvement efforts; Veterans, service and dedication; Vice President; Virginia, President's visit.

DCPD Number: DCPD202301000.