



Patrick F. Leahy

Heroes Brunch | Thursday 8, 2012

Thank you, Marcia. I am honored to provide comments on such a special occasion. I am so proud to be the president of a university that brings our students together with veterans from our region. I'd just like to take a few minutes to offer a few thank yous. Let me start by thanking all of you for being here today. This is a particularly appropriate day to host a Heroes Brunch. You see, this event is situated between November 6th – Election Day – and November 11th – Veterans Day. This past Tuesday we witnessed yet again one of the best expressions of our nation's deepest values. Every Tuesday after the first Monday in November, we hold elections. Whether your candidates won or lost, Election Day restates with vigor what President Lincoln said 149 years ago this month. At Gettysburg, President Lincoln said: "We here highly resolve that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth." The military men and women in this room – our veterans – ensure those freedoms. Is it any wonder that veterans vote at 50% higher rates than typical Americans? And, next Sunday on the 11th of November our nation will once again celebrate Veterans Day. This is the day of the year that we pause as a nation to remember our men and women in uniform – past and present – and thank them for their service to our country. What a perfect time to hold a Heroes Brunch! The writer, Maya Angelou, would call this a "He-roes and She-roes Brunch!" Thank you all for being here today to celebrate the veteran's oral history project at Wilkes University.

Next, let me thank in a special way all of the veterans gathered here today for sharing your stories with our students. These stories need to be told and retold. (And, if you are like my father, a former Marine Corps officer, the stories get better and better every time.) In a present-day world that features e-mail and text messaging and social media, there have never been more ways to communicate with each other. Yet, despite these new methods, we have seemingly lost our ability to relate to one another. This special project is an important effort in reconnecting people, especially people across the generations. As PBS has suggested: "For those who served our nation, from the battle front to the home front, every story deserves to be heard." It's an important part of who we are as a nation. The newer generations need to hear these stories of sacrifice, both abroad and at home. Thank you, veterans, for telling your stories, especially if at any time it was painful for you. And, while I'm at it, let me thank our students for hearing these stories so carefully. Some of you had the great fortune to be paired with a World War II veteran. What a special privilege to hear their stories! Our World War II veterans are leaving us at a rate of 800 or so per day. You students – all of us in fact – need to hear these stories before it's too late. 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. Would any World War II veterans please raise your hands and be recognized?

But, our nation has been blessed with 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 some Americans spit at them.
- When Iraq invaded Kuwait, the next generation of Americans responded, making it clear that naked aggression would not stand.
- And, when 9/11 happened, yet another generation of Americans responded and are still responding.

In fact, whenever Americans have been threatened by a foe or summoned by a friend, Americans have responded. The veterans who join us today represent many of these episodes in American history. You students represent the next generation of Americans, who may be asked to answer the call when it comes. Thank you, students, for participating so fully in this project.

So, what I really want to say today to our assembled veterans – on behalf of all of us here at Wilkes University – is thank you for your service to our country. Your commitment and your sacrifices are appreciated by many of us Americans who too often take you and your stories for granted. I never served in the armed forces, so I don't think I fully understood your sacrifices, that is, until I met a young veteran who graduated from the University of Scranton. A few years ago – while I was still working at Scranton – this young veteran was nominated for the alumni service award, which recognizes a lifetime of distinction, just 5 short years after his own graduation. I asked: how can someone this young possibly be eligible for this award? Then, I met this young man. He had recently returned from serving a tour of duty in Iraq as an Army Ranger. One night he went out on a patrol and was hit by a sniper bullet. Evidently, one bullet blinded him in both eyes and paralyzed part of his limbs. When I met this young man, he told me his story. At the end he said: If I knew then what would happen to me, I would go on that patrol again. Despite his young age, The University of Scranton gave him that lifetime achievement award. Our thinking was that some people distinguish themselves in a moment when it takes most of us a lifetime. This is just one of countless examples of ways veterans serve our country. Thank you all for the ways you strengthen our United States of America.

And, I want to say a special thank you to the unsung heroes of our military – the military family members. You family members serve our country in unheralded ways. Your sacrifice will not be forgotten. The family members of our service men and women deserve our gratitude today, too. There should be a national holiday specifically for you.

And, today, I think it is important to take a moment to remember all of your fellow veterans who have given the ultimate sacrifice in defense of our American way of life. Their stories have been written to their conclusion, but they must never be forgotten. Please join me in a moment of silence to remember those special veterans.

So, today we pause simply to say 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 this earth.” Let the heroism of these individual service men and women gathered here inspire our own acts of selflessness and duty and courage. May their heroism inspire our own heroism.

Thank you.