

Address at the Rancho Bernardo Veterans Memorial.

Veterans Day, November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2013

It is a distinct honor, for which I am grateful, to speak here today. I particularly wish to thank Dave Epstein, Commander of VFW Post 7766, and Mike Vaughn, President of the Rancho Bernardo Veterans Memorial Association, for inviting me to join you at Webb Park today. I also thank Admiral Rich Fontaine for his supportive presence.

We must all thank the young gentlemen of the honor guard who so properly and proudly paraded our nation's flag.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I was last with you on a Memorial Day, and called it the saddest of our national holidays, because on it we remember the service men and women who have died, particularly those who gave their lives, mostly – by far -- young lives, in our nation's wars.

Today we honor all veterans, all who have served in our armed forces, both dead and living. For living veterans, this should be a happy day, when you are thanked for your service, when you remember what it was like to serve, and, if you are really fortunate, when you meet old war companions and briefly relive your shared experience of surviving lethal dangers.

Today it is particularly fitting to recognize and again thank the veterans of the really big war, the Second World War, which saw the entire nation, not only the 12 million Americans, mostly young, who were in uniform by the war's end, but everybody, from children to the very old, unite for Victory.

America then went to war because Japan attacked her and Germany soon after declared war on her. The war objective was implicitly clear in December 1941, and President Roosevelt made it explicit at the Casablanca conference in early 1943: Unconditional Surrender of the criminal governments of Germany and Japan.

It took two and a half years, until mid-1945, but the war indeed ended in complete military defeats and unconditional surrenders of Germany and Japan.

You WW2 veterans had clear war aims and, with the support of a united nation, you achieved them completely. We salute you for your valor, unflagging determination, and complete victory.

It takes nothing from you Second World War heroes that the veterans of later wars, police actions, and interventions have envied the clarity of your war's aims. Because, since 1945, clear war aims have been rare, and those who served more often endured the consequences of muddled policies and confused strategies.

The Korean War started with a clear objective, to defeat the North Korean invaders and restore the Republic of Korea's territorial integrity. That objective was soon achieved by courageously holding the Pusan perimeter, landing at Inchon, and rapidly clearing South Korea of enemy forces. But at that point our war aims became confused, senior councils divided, China intervened, and our soldiers and Marines, mostly young, were condemned to more than two years of trench warfare along a line that scarcely moved, ending in an armistice without a peace.

More than half America's Korean War casualties were sustained in the trench war, from massed Chinese artillery fire and infantry attacks, in our counteroffensives, in desperate hand-to-hand struggles in places given names such as Pork Chop Hill and Old Baldy. The horror of that warfare was even worse during the wet monsoons. Many of our dead, hit by shells, were never recovered from the mud that buried them.

You Korean War veterans, along with companions no longer alive, endured the years of bitter fighting, the extremes of cold and heat from winter to summer, the labor and strain of digging and rebuilding defences within easy range of enemy guns, and you did it all heroically, holding the line while negotiations at Panmunjom crawled to their unsatisfactory conclusion. You did it all with honor, while our nation as a whole had little idea of what you were doing so far away.

Hoping to make some amends, we others all now deeply thank you Korean War veterans .

The most numerous of today's living combat veterans are those who served in the Vietnam War. Most of us served there in or after 1965, when large American forces were deployed to prevent the collapse and defeat of our ally, the anti-communist Republic of Vietnam.

We now know, from President Johnson's audio tapes and Defense Secretary McNamara's admissions in his old age, that as they ordered the large-scale deployment of American forces, soon numbering a half-million, they had no clear idea of what our forces were to achieve, nor had they a clear strategy for the war.

They initially thought that our forces' arrival in Vietnam would deter our enemies and make them give up their fight for South Vietnam. That showed an abysmal disregard of an important tenet of war: Know your enemy.

The first big test of the enemy's abilities and determination came 48 years ago this week, when three outnumbered battalions of the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Cavalry Division fought fierce battles over four days and nights at Landing Zones X-ray and Albany in the Ia Drang Valley of the Central Highlands.

When that fighting ended, 234 young Americans had been killed. The Americans had fought bravely, but their courage had been matched by the enemy's. In the truly expert opinion of

Lieutenant General Hal Moore, who then commanded one of the battalions, the battles were between two of the world's best light infantry forces: America's and Vietnam's.

The participants had learned mutual respect. And we had learned that the enemy would not just give up now that entire American divisions were being committed to the war. Far from it.

Secretary McNamara's next thought was that the enemy's battle losses would eventually destroy its ability to continue the war. After all, the enemy's losses in the Ia Drang battles had been 5 times or more greater than ours, and Vietnam, north and south combined, had a total population fewer than 40 million.

Our young men soon found themselves in a war of attrition, in which "body count" became the measure of assumed progress. But again the theory was invalid, because it misunderstood the enemy.

58,000 Americans were killed in Vietnam or died of wounds inflicted there, each one a bitter loss for our country. Our enemy's first-line force, the People's Army of Vietnam, the PAVN, which we called the NVA, lost half a million men. They additionally lost thousands of women auxiliaries, and more tens of thousands of their irregular fighters, the Viet Cong. But Hanoi's leaders accepted the casualties as to be expected in war with a superpower, and were not deterred.

Returning to Vietnam decades after he had fought there, General Hal Moore reflected on what he knew and America's leaders should have known during the war. Here's what he wrote about our former enemies in his book, "We Are Soldiers Still":

*At the time we were fighting these men in our long-ago war there were those on our side who denied them their humanity, who spoke of our enemies as if they were robots who served an alien cause, Communism, only because some commissar had a gun pointed at the back of their heads. No thought was given to the possibility that they were fighting so hard because, like America's own revolutionaries, they had a burning desire to drive the foreigners out of their native land; that nationalism was a far more compelling reason for them to fight than Communism. They were good soldiers, implacable foes in battle, and now that the guns had fallen silent and peace had returned to their land they proved good friends.*

That, ladies and gentlemen, is a hard-headed, no-nonsense American general's appraisal of our enemies. Sadly, although it was there to be seen in 1965, our leaders didn't grasp it.

So, facing an enemy that had clearly understood war aims, but lacking the same ourselves, our forces nevertheless fought with determination, often heroically, for years on end.

You veterans fought from Ca Mau in the south to Cua Viet on the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel, in the highlands, along the rivers of the vast Delta, in the coastal plains, the rice paddies, jungles, cities and villages, and in an intense air war over the North.

When taken prisoner, our men continued their resistance heroically.

Our forces were joined by the many brave, effective units of the ARVN, our Vietnamese allies. It was the ARVN, advised by Americans and supported by immense American air power, that withstood and broke the Spring Offensive of 1972, forcing the PAVN to withdraw, rebuild, and prepare for the overwhelming final offensive of 1975.

General William Tecumseh Sherman, reflecting on the Civil War, was of course right when he told us War is Hell.

It is made a hell by all the enemy does to us, and it is made worse by some of what we do. In Vietnam, some hell was made by us, by the demoralization of our forces.

Many would say the forces' demoralization was inevitable, given the government's inability to tell America why the war was essential.

Given also the Administrations and Congresses' insincere, vacillating commitment to waging the war.

And given also military personnel policies that placed careerism and ticket punching ahead of the troops' need for strong leaders in command of combat units.

Marine Colonel Robert Heintz summarized the demoralization in an essay titled "The Collapse of the Armed Forces," published in 1971. Even today it shocks its readers, particularly by mentioning some symptoms of the collapse.

You veterans who served honorably could cite your own examples of shame. I will mention only three.

First and worst was the My Lai massacre, in which American soldiers murdered hundreds of defenseless women and children, even babies. The second is at the war memorial in Washington, where the dead named on the wall include scores of officers and NCOs who were murdered, "fraggged," by their own men in Vietnam. The third was a Navy SEAL officer and a few of his men who were arrested, tried, convicted, and imprisoned for trafficking heroin from Vietnam to San Diego.

The United States must never again cause or permit our armed forces to lose their way, to collapse morally.

Veterans, whether they served in war or peace, have a duty to help prevent such collapse. After all, veterans know what service means, what military discipline is. Veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, where 6750 young Americans have given their lives, particularly know what it means.

Today, it is appropriate and fitting for veterans to be thanked for their past service. Equally fitting is the service they can continue to give the nation.

Every veteran can be an example to fellow citizens by taking the time and effort, before we again commit young Americans to war or offensive action, to understand why it is essential and the only course open to our nation, to understand its objectives and how they are to be achieved. They can then quietly and with moral authority speak out.

In effect the veterans can remind all citizens of their duty, to be lived with high diligence, of ensuring that young Americans will be committed to combat action only when we know what we as a nation are doing, and what we are doing is right.

By continuing to serve in this quiet way, veterans may allow future servicemen and women the best chance, borrowing words from the Marine Hymn, to fight for right and freedom, and to keep their honor clean.

This is enormously important. Together we must be diligent citizens, so that together we can live the words of our National Anthem:

*Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just,*

*And this be our motto, "In God is our trust."*