

*NOTE: This speech was adapted from the 2019 Wisconsin National Guard speech, itself being adapted from a variety of materials for use in Veterans Day speeches by Wisconsin National Guard personnel.*

Thank you Ray Grabowski and the South Milwaukee American Legion Post 27 for inviting me here to speak today.

Thank you to Representative Jessie Rodriguez, Mayor Brooks, Fire Chief Knitter and other distinguished guests for attending.

Thank you also for members of the public for coming out to show support of our veterans.

My name is Jason Walker. Today I stand before you as a Major in the Wisconsin Army National Guard. I have also been privileged to wear the uniform of a Navy Hospital Corpsman, and also while a Corpsman meet the standard to wear the Marine Corps uniform while stationed with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Division in Okinawa. Some of you may know me wearing another uniform, that of a South Milwaukee Police Officer. All are uniforms I am proud of, for over twenty years in the military and sixteen in the police department.

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today to represent the 10,000 men and women, Soldiers and Airmen, of the Wisconsin Army and Air National Guard on Veterans Day.

Since the days of our nation's heroic origins, generations of our fellow Americans have stood up and answered the call to serve in our Armed forces. Some in peace time, and others during times of war and conflict – all are deserving of our respect and gratitude not only today - on Veterans Day, but every day of the year. Our veterans have secured this nation's freedoms, liberties, and prosperity.

As a member of the Wisconsin National Guard, I am proud to have been a part of the one percent that served this nation, and I am proud to stand shoulder-to-shoulder amongst the brave men and women – our veterans – who served before me. It pains anyone who has worn the uniform, to think of our brothers and sisters from previous conflicts, who did not enjoy the appreciation today's veterans receive. Many never received the welcome home they deserved after serving our nation, or even worse, many were belittled, harassed, or demeaned for fighting in an unpopular war.

I am grateful that today, our veterans face no such treatment, and they enjoy a place of honor in our society. On numerous occasions, total strangers will come up to say, "thank you for your service," or express their appreciation for service in other ways. Restaurants offer free lunches, and businesses offer discounts, and our fellow Americans wave Old Glory to show their support, among many other patriotic, thoughtful and well-

meaning gestures. While those sentiments are meaningful and very much appreciated, I can say with certainty that veterans did not serve their nation to receive thanks, praise, or heraldry. They served their nation because they loved it more than they loved themselves. They served for the common good and to ensure the preservation of this republic for the next generation and their children, just as their forefathers before them secured it for us. They served their nation because they cherished the freedoms, liberties, and ideals for which this nation stands.

But while every veteran and service member is grateful for the thanks, love and support of our fellow citizens, none of us took an oath for that reason. Instead, I ask, on behalf of all veterans, that instead of thanking a veteran for his or her service, that you be the sort of American worth fighting for, worth sacrificing for...one worth defending.

As Americans, we've all been given a gift. Too often we forget that or take it for granted. It is incumbent upon each and every one of us to protect the gift of America, given to you and secured by the brave veterans that fought to ensure it was passed on from generation to generation. This gift was borne by the blood, sweat, tears, and sacrifice of men and women who served and fought to ensure freedom for you and me. It's secured by those who stood up and said, "send me" when their nation called. It was the

veteran who wrote a blank check made payable to you, at a cost up to and including their life, to ensure you could enjoy the freedom you have today.

It is up to us, as a free people, to protect that gift and to make the sacrifice of the veteran one worth making, to ensure we don't squander the gift of America. So what can you do? Your service to our nation can start, or continue, by getting involved in our electoral process, voting, running for office, serving on a school board, volunteering in the community, fundraising for charity, helping your neighbor, exercising your rights and freedoms, teaching, or standing up for the Constitution. It is up to us to work every day to make this nation a better place – one worth fighting for.

Thanks to our veterans we can speak freely in this country. We can criticize our government. We enjoy a free press that keeps government accountable. We are free to worship however we see fit. We can also thank our veterans for the peace and security our nation has enjoyed for centuries. Instead of wars and unrest playing out in American streets, veterans made their chests a barricade between war and their homeland – waging war on our behalf against our enemies in distant lands rather than in our own countryside.

One hundred years ago today, our nation commemorated its first Armistice Day, which later became known as Veterans Day. The day was November 11, 1919, exactly one year since the guns of World War I fell silent on battlefields across Europe. The Great War, as it was known, ended at 11:11 on 11/11 in 1918, and the world swore it would be the “war to end all wars.”

Of course, we know that it wasn't. There have been more wars and conflicts, and in every case, the American serviceman – seemingly ordinary people like you and me – were there to answer the call, serving and sacrificing on our behalf. Their families, their communities, and their employers have been right alongside our veterans sacrificing as well. Families bear the brunt of that sacrifice as they have to bear months or even years of separation, and take on additional duties at home, all the while worrying for their Soldier, Sailor, Airmen, Marine or Coast Guardsman in harm's way.

On Veterans Day, we must pause and remember the Soldiers who froze through Valley Forge when the idea of a free and independent USA was nothing more than a faint flicker of hope, and we must remember the Union Soldier staring down the barrels of Confederate guns. We must remember the Marines that island hopped in the Pacific and the thousands who

stormed the beaches at Normandy. We can never forget those that stood in the gap and stared down the Soviets and preserved a tenuous peace in Western Europe, or fought the communists in a frozen Korean winter or in the steaming jungles of Vietnam. We must not forget that we still have Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, and Coast Guardsmen fighting in places like Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan.

In the National Guard, we talk often about the idea of the Minutemen dropping their plow and picking up their muskets to go defend what they hold dear – their families, their way of life, their land, their communities.

Today's veteran is no different than those earliest patriots, just as they are no different than those who fought in World War II, Korea, or Vietnam. They are all men and women who stood up and answered the call when their nation needed them. There's a common thread that binds veterans of all conflicts and all services together. They put the needs of their nation ahead of their own personal dreams, ambitions, and often their families, their careers, their education, and more. They are the few and the proud, and yes, they deserve all the praise and adoration we can muster.

I ask you once again, rather than simply praising them, honor the service and sacrifice of our veterans by becoming the sort of Americans worth

fighting for, for we all fight because we love this country and hope to see it grow and succeed. The veteran can rest assured and know every day when they look in the mirror, that they did what they could for their country.

Take the gift that our veterans have given, to preserve our nation and build upon this rock solid foundation to keep the United States of America a country worth the sacrifice. On behalf of veterans everywhere, I ask that we focus on all that binds us together as Americans – from our heroic origins, to our love of the freedoms and prosperity we enjoy today. Ask what you can do to serve this country and unify this great nation, so the sacrifice of our veterans is not in vain. This is the Promised Land thanks to those who have sacrificed and preserved it as such. Let us never take that for granted. Let us always be the example the world looks to as a symbol of hope, inspiration, and freedom.

To my fellow veterans, thank you for your service and sacrifice for this country. Thank you all for the opportunity to speak here to you today, and may God continue to bless America.