

Administration of Barack Obama, 2014

Remarks at the Dedication Ceremony for the American Veterans Disabled For Life Memorial

October 5, 2014

Thank you so much. Good afternoon. Please be seated. To all our disabled veterans—our extraordinary wounded warriors—we gather here today, on this gorgeous autumn day in America, because each of you endured a moment that shaped the arc of your lives and that speaks to our debt as a nation.

Maybe it was there on the battlefield, as the bullets and shrapnel rained down around you. Maybe it was as you lay there, the medics tending to your wounds. Perhaps it was days or months later, in that hospital room, when you finally came to. Perhaps it was years later, as you went about your day, or in the midnight hour, when the memories came rushing back like a flood.

Wherever you were, whatever your story, it was the moment that binds each of you forever, that moment of realization that life would not be the same. Your foot. Your hand. Your arm. Your leg, maybe both. Your sight. Your peace of mind. A part of you was gone.

Speaking to his fellow veterans of the Civil War, the great Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., once said, "As I look into your eyes I feel . . . that a great trial in your youth made you different . . . different from what we could have been without it." And he said, we learned "a lesson early which has given a different feeling to life," a sense of duty that burns like a fire in the heart.

To Lois Pope, Art Wilson, and everyone at the Memorial Foundation and our incredible veterans service organizations who devoted so many years of effort, especially our friends at the Disabled American Veterans; to all the architects and craftspeople who lent your talents to bring this memorial to life; Members of Congress, Secretaries Jewell and McDonald; distinguished guests; and most of all, to our veterans who have come to know "a different feeling to life," and to your families: It's a great honor to be with you here today.

For more than two centuries, Americans have left everything they have known and loved—their families and their friends—and stepped forward to serve: to win our independence, to preserve our Union, to defend our democracy, to keep safe this country that we love. And when the guns fall silent, our veterans return home, ready to play their part in the next chapter of our American story. As a nation, we have not always fulfilled our obligations to those who served in our name. This is a painful truth. And few have known this better than our veterans wounded in war.

In the first years after our Revolution, when our young Nation still resisted the idea of a standing army, veterans of the Continental Army returned to towns that could be indifferent to their service. One veteran, his hand mangled by a British musketball, was deemed, like many veterans, as "unfit for labor." And frustrated by his inability to secure a disability pension, he wrote that "many of those who aided in conquering the enemy are suffering under the most distressing poverty." After the Civil War, and again after the First World War, our disabled veterans had to organize and march for the benefits they had earned. Down the decades, our Nation has worked to do better, to do right by these patriots. Because in the United States of America, those who have fought for our freedom should never be shunned and should never be forgotten.

So today we take another step forward. With this memorial, we commemorate, for the first time, the two battles our disabled veterans have fought: the battle over there and the battle here at home, your battle to recover, which at times can be even harder and certainly is longer. You walk these quiet grounds, pause by the pictures of these men and women—you look into their eyes, read their words—and we're somehow able to join them on a journey that speaks to the endurance of the American spirit. And to you, our veterans and wounded warriors, we thank you for sharing your journey with us.

Here we feel your fears: the shock of that first moment when you realized something was different, the confusion about what would come next, the frustrations and the worries, as one veteran said, "that maybe I wouldn't be quite the same."

And then, here we see your resolve: your refusal, in the face of overwhelming odds, to give in to despair or to cynicism; your decision, your choice, to overcome. Like the veteran who said, "It's possible for a man to lose half his physical being and still become whole."

It is here we can see your perseverance: your unyielding faith that tomorrow can be better; your relentless determination, often through years of hard recovery and surgeries and rehab, learning the simple things all over again—how to button a shirt or how to write your name, in some cases, how to talk or how to walk; and how, when you've stumbled, when you've fallen, you've picked yourself up, you've carried on, you've never given up.

Here we get a glimpse of the wounds within, the veteran who says, "I relive the war every day." Because no matter what war you served in, and whether they called it "shell shock" or "battle fatigue" or the hundred—"1,000-yard stare" or posttraumatic stress, you know that the unseen wounds of war are just as real as any other, and they can hurt just as much, if not more.

Here we're reminded that none of you have made this journey alone. Beside each of you is a wife or a husband, mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, and neighbors and friends, who day after day, year after year, have been there, lifting you up, pushing you further, rooting you on, like the caregiver who said: "I love him for who he was in his heart. And he still had that." Today we salute all your families and the love that never quits.

And finally, here we see that our wounded veterans are defined not by what you can't do, but by what you can do. Just ask Captain Dawn Halfaker. In Iraq, her Humvee was hit by an RPG. She suffered burns and broken bones, lost her right arm. She struggled physically and emotionally. But with the help of her fellow wounded warriors, she came to focus, she said, "not on what I had lost, but on what I still had." And today, what she has is the respect of her fellow veterans that she mentors; a business of her own, one that hires veterans; and a beautiful 6-month-old son. Dawn's picture—this member of the 9/11 generation—now graces this memorial, and we are honored that she is here today. And, Dawn, please stand up.

I've seen Dawn's story over and over and over again, in all the wounded warriors and veterans that I have the honor to meet, from Walter Reed to Bethesda, to Bagram. I know in Dawn's life, many of you see your own. Today I want every American to see it: how, after everything you endured, after all the loss, you summoned the best in yourself and found your strength again; how many of you learned to walk again and stand again and run again; how you've competed in races and marathons and the Paralympics on Team U.S.A.; how you found joy and love, getting married, raising children; how you found new ways to serve, returning to your units or starting new businesses or teaching our children or serving your fellow veterans or leading in your communities.

America, if you want to know what real strength is, if you want to see the character of our country, a country that never quits, look at these men and women. And I'd ask all of our disabled veterans here today, if you can stand, please stand; if not, please raise your hand so that our Nation can pay tribute to your service. We thank you, we are inspired by you, and we honor you.

From this day forward, Americans will come to this place and ponder the immense sacrifice made on their behalf, the heavy burden borne by a few so that we might live in freedom and peace. Of course, our reflection is not enough. Our expressions of gratitude are not enough.

Here, in the heart of our Nation's Capital, this memorial is a challenge to all of us, a reminder of "the obligations this country is under." And if we are to truly honor these veterans, we must heed the voices that speak to us here. Let's never rush into war, because it is America's sons and daughters who bear the scars of war for the rest of their lives. Let us only send them into harm's way when it's absolutely necessary. And if we do, let's always give them the strategy and the mission and the support that they need to get the job done. When the mission is over—as our war in Afghanistan comes to a responsible end in 2 months—let us stand united as Americans and welcome our veterans home with the thanks and respect they deserve.

And if they come home having left a part of themselves on the battlefield, on our behalf, this memorial tells us what we must do. When our wounded veterans set out on that long road of recovery, we need to move heaven and earth to make sure they get every single benefit, every single bit of care that they have earned, that they deserve.

If they're hurting and don't know if they can go on, we need to say loud and clear, as family and friends, as neighbors and coworkers, as fellow citizens, and as a nation: You are not alone, it's all right to ask for help, and we're here to help you be strong again. Because our wounded warriors may have "a different feeling to life," but when we are truly there for them, when we give them every opportunity to succeed and continue their enormous contributions to our country, then our whole Nation is stronger, and all our lives are richer.

So if you're an American and you see a veteran—maybe with a prosthetic arm or leg, maybe burns on their face—don't ever look away. Do not turn away. You go up, and you reach out, and you shake their hand, and you look them in the eye, and you say those words every veteran should hear all the time: "Welcome home. Thank you. We need you more than ever. You help us stay strong; you helped us stay free."

To every wounded warrior, to every disabled veteran: Thank you. God bless you. God bless these United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:21 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to Lois P. Pope, cofounder and chairman, and Arthur H. Wilson, cofounder and president, American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial; Santa Fe, NM, resident Michael Naranjo, an Army veteran wounded by a grenade blast during the Vietnam war; and Jayme Bozik, wife of Sgt. Joseph Bozik, USA, a paratrooper in the 82d Airborne Division who lost both of his legs and his right arm from an antitank mine explosion in Iraq in October 2004; and Dawn Halfaker, member of the board of directors, Wounded Warrior Project, and president and chief executive officer, Halfaker & Associates, LLC, and her son Raice.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial, dedication ceremony.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Bozik, Jayme; Bozik, Joseph; Halfaker, Dawn; Halfaker, Raice; Jewell, Sarah M.R. "Sally"; McDonald, Robert A.; Naranjo, Michael; Pope, Lois P.; Wilson, Arthur H.

Subjects: Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Casualties; Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Service and dedication; District of Columbia : American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial; Interior, Department of the : Secretary; Veterans : Disabled veterans; Veterans : Service and dedication; Veterans Affairs, Department of : Secretary.

DCPD Number: DCPD201400747.