

Thank you Madame Speaker, to the bill.

Colleagues I rise in support of this bill today for really three reasons. But before I get to why, I just want to say that this is one of those measures where unfortunately I think a lot of the side discussions and angst surrounding it really has nothing at all to do with the underlying issue. I think most members of the military, especially those that are serving in this body that have served in the last 30 or 40 years recognize that we have served with people of different sexual orientation, different culture, different race, and been better because of it. Stronger because of it. The underlying factor I think that is frustrating to some military members, some veterans is that this particular measure was viewed by some to have leapfrogged other bills.

Other priorities that have not been funded for some time, and I want to stand here and say that I applaud the Speaker and the folks that were involved in making investments this session that are above and beyond what we had expected for veterans. I look forward to working in the February session to try to get even more funds to help veterans across the board, and that ultimately I think we have to recognize that this is not something that is being leapfrogged because of a lack of need, because it is in fact needed; but it is actually something that is timely and here's what I mean.

I don't know if you've strolled through the World War Two Memorial very recently, I did this afternoon for lunch, I do that when I'm frustrated by other things and I think as all 60 of us can come together and share the Senate right now is enough frustration for all of us, so that was the reason I went for a walk this lunch.

And I sat there looking at the names on the columns, and I don't know who was gay, who was straight. It didn't matter, they all bled the same. Vietnam. I don't know who was gay, who was straight that served and who didn't come home or who came home with missing parts of them. And I know that my own military service, I joined in '92 and was retired out in 2013, I was in the service during the rise of 'Don't Ask Don't Tell' and the changes to where people could ask and could show, could tell, could talk about their families.

I believe this bill is important for reason number one, there are WWII, Korea and Vietnam veterans passing that didn't have as much of a choice in serving, that in some cases were pushed out for no other reason than being who they were and we need to fix that. And if that means a little extra help, to have somebody who's an expert to do it, then it's worth our time, it's worth our talents, it's worth our treasure because stolen valor, for whatever the reason, has to be corrected.

I also think the second reason I'm for this is because it allowing this conversation, right here, right now. Sometimes history is too easy with the years, we don't remember because most of us were not here when Truman desegregated the military with Executive Order 9881, we do not remember the frustration and the challenge and the change it took for people to recognize that how we knew the world needed to change. We are living through that experience now and if a coordinator can help us in that larger conversation, if a coordinator for these folks who are denied the opportunity to serve and exit with honor can help us become smarter, and better and stronger as a community and as a state, then again that's a reason to vote in favor of it.

The third thing, the third reason that I think is, for me anyway, the most important one, is because I personally have served with folks, and when I was in the Air Force, we HAD to by law administratively discharge folks for admitting and talking about and going to the military and saying that they needed to be discharged because of their orientation. I never understood it then, quite frankly.

It was frustrating to me because I've always believed that anybody that wants to enjoy the rights and the privileges of citizenship and wants the great things about our country should be asked to serve, and it never made sense to me why we were asking people to leave who had proven and demonstrated a willingness to both serve and do it well. So I can't speak for every veteran here, I'm not even going to try. I can tell you though, that as somebody who has lead men and women, straight and gay, under very hostile circumstances, it never really matters and it shouldn't matter, orientation, it shouldn't matter culture, really it only matters two things. Are they serving as well as they possibly can?

And I'll wait. [Procedural pause]

Thank you colleagues.

And are they doing everything they can while they're there to make us a better and stronger society?

Last week I passed out something, you might have thought it was somewhat odd, it was the poem of "The Charge of the Light Brigade." Sometimes in this building the word veteran is too easy to put up there as just a group of people. And what I want to emphasize with that particular poem is if you read through it, the folks understood what was going on at the time, they understood they were going into the cauldron, they understood they probably weren't going to come back but they didn't question because that was not their job. Their question was to go.

When you sign the dotted line, when you join the military, as the good representative from southern Oregon has talked about several times you sign a check that says 'Up to and including your life'. Thankfully we're now at a point that it doesn't ask, 'only if you're straight' or 'only if you're white' or 'only if you're male'. Because I think we are learning as a society that we are smarter and better when people of all backgrounds can come together and defend those things, but today's military is even more important to us, because as Washington once said: "Every generation of veterans looks back upon the generation previously as to how they were treated."

And I have often wondered how hard it must have been for folks of color during WWII to be fighting for freedoms that they couldn't experience themselves here in the U.S., and what an amazing time we live in now, where as we are starting to recognize the changes in society and how we didn't understand people as well as we may now today, that we are 'come as you are, serve as you can, help make us a stronger, better country.'

We are a small state in a larger conversation, but I think this particular bill at this particular time is a critical investment. I want to emphasize it is not the only investment we should be making, we need to make a whole lot more, and I'm asking for everybody's help to continue doing that, especially as February turns into the next session, and the years beyond. But just as we had to rush to get the World War Two Memorial built before the last WWII veteran passed, we do not have time on our side on this. This is an opportunity to have somebody who can become an expert help folks get the honor, and the valor restored that they deserve, and that's why I'm asking for your aye vote on this measure. Thank you for your consideration.