

Four score and seventeen years ago the War to End All Wars concluded in pyric triumph: fifty-seven months of warfare spanning the globe left 9,000,000 dead, and over 21,000,000 combatants wounded.

Consider for a moment: nearly eleven percent – more than one in ten people of France perished – a result of miscalculation and misunderstanding – casualties of a global struggle waged for romantic illusions of days past.

Modernity transformed the nature of war.

The men who led their heroic armies on horseback into battle in the autumn of 1914 soon learned the harsh tragic realities of mechanized combat.

The glories of warfare – were replaced with the horrors of killing on an industrial scale. The Great War demonstrated for all time the fundamental obsolescence of limited war in an industrial age.

For nearly four and a half years Europe tore itself apart: it manifested a global upheaval that continues to echo through time. It is a cautionary tale of the consequences – of the avoidable tragedies – of unchecked hubris and unbridled imperial enthusiasm.

The war threatened Western Civilization in a way that no previous contest had: two powerful alliances fielding and sustaining massive armies fought to a virtual stalemate – by 1917 both sides were exhausted – economies faltered – societies began to fall into disarray.

Seven months after the US joined the fight the war was over. Our entry into that war tipped the balance and determined its military result.

In those seven months of combat the American Expeditionary Forces lost over 116,000 dead; with thrice that number carrying scars of their service “Over there...” for the remainder of their lives.

And then – at the eleventh second, of the eleventh minute, of the eleventh hour, of the eleventh day of the eleventh month of 1918 the guns of August stopped; the Western Front became eerily silent.

Battlefields that had moments before rained shrapnel and resonated with the sharp staccato of arms, with roaring torrents of explosions and the screams, and the shouts, and the whimpers of men became still.

Across Europe ninety-seven years ago today – the dense, thick, acrid smoke of the front lifted. Men who had long surrendered the hope of surviving the war – slowly climbed out of the trenches, breathed easier, and welcomed the stillness in dazed relief.

Men embraced comrades; some reached across “no-mans-land” barbed wire and fortifications to embrace former enemies. At wars end, the fraternity of arms stood at rest.

Battle-hardened soldiers struggled to accept their fate: somehow, for some reason, they had survived the killing fields.

The Great War turned out to be less and more than the combatants engaged in it believed: it was not the end of war, but it was an important turning point in our heritage, our history, and in the development of our Western Civilization.

It was as Margaret MacMillan wrote, “...the war that ended peace.”

It taught us the limits of power, the dangers of entangling alliances based upon interests – rather than principle – and it planted seeds of generational sectarian rivalries along frontiers redrawn in its wake.

It showed us the consequences of embarking upon crusades of choice – and why war in the modern age should be confined to a last, worst necessity to be undertaken only when necessary.

The Great War was so terrible in its impact that the next year, 1919, President Wilson and the US Congress set-aside November 11th as a permanent holiday to celebrate the Armistice.

Over the nine decades this celebration has evolved – Armistice Day, now Veterans Day – is today a celebration honoring all the men and women who have served in the US Armed Forces.

It is a day of reflection, of remembrance, and of renewal – it is a day for redemption and a time for rededication: a moment for us all to consider the courage of the men and women who served before us – the Americans who stood up and stepped forward when so many others stepped aside.

Today is about a celebration of the meaning of courage – a moment to consider the costs. For there is a profound moral difference between the person who expresses an interest in making America a great country, and the courage to fight for America to make it great.

It is fitting and proper to gather together at events such as this and ponder our endowment: the promise of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

At such times it is customary – critical – for us to acknowledge the loss of life so willingly offered upon the altar of Freedom – we are drawn into wistfully contemplating the many roads not taken: the consequence to our world had the men and women who gave so much – chosen another path.

All who have worn the uniform made a choice. Some, like those we honor on the wall, paid the ultimate price for making that choice. They did what they did – because of a shared trust in us – a belief that Americans would be good stewards of their sacrifice, service and last full measure of devotion.

These gatherings are about reaffirming the values and beliefs of something larger than ourselves; something larger than all of us.

Today is about the promise of America.

We are here to reflect upon the duty passed onto us by those that went before: by those who gave us everything they had to give in times of peace and war.

We here assembled are called upon to continue the work, to complete the mission.

Listen to the voices of history: to the men of Lexington and Concord, New Orleans, Gettysburg, the Argonne, Normandy, Saipan, the Chosen Reservoir, Ia Drang, Panama, Kuwait City, Mogadishu, Kosovo, Kandahar, and Baghdad. Today is an opportunity to recommit ourselves to what Lincoln called, “a new birth of Freedom.”

Together we can honor them by reclaiming Lincoln’s America a land... “of the people, by the people, and for the people.” This is our charge, this is our duty, and this is our responsibility.

Today – this Veterans Day – our nation is struggling to keep faith with its promise.

Today – this Veterans Day – across America some twenty-two veterans will chose suicide – with at least one of these a veteran of Afghanistan, Iraq, or both.

Today – this Veterans Day – at least 58,000 homeless veterans will struggle to find food, shelter, and warmth. With at least 1,200 of them here in our Oregon.

Today – this Veterans Day – tens of thousands of military families pray and wait for word of loved ones in Harm's Way on our behalf.

Today – this Veterans Day – the rate of incarcerated veterans is fast becoming a national epidemic: prisons are a new “dumping ground” for veterans in crisis.

And today, this Veterans Day – over twenty-two thousand recently released veterans with PTSD, TBI, or both, are searching for help outside the military because they were separated by the military – for being too much trouble.

We must seek a new path forward. We must seek the power of redemption through a return to civic duty – we have a mission yet to accomplish: we owe it to the men and women who preserved our freedoms to restore America – to rekindle the spark that made us a shining city on the hill – to renew our individual commitment to fighting at home for the ideals we fought for abroad.

This is not the first time America has needed help keeping faith with her veterans. In truth, Oregon has a history of leading the march towards reform.

It was here – Walter W. Waters and what would become the Bonus Expeditionary Army set out for Washington DC – an army of over 20,000 WWI Veterans demanding President Hoover and the US Congress honor its debts.

That initial effort was broken and their temporary city was put to the torch by the US Army – the same army so many of them had served with in France, the same army many of them would again serve during WWII.

However, the memories of Hoover's War on the Bonus Army lingered – the brutality of the attack accelerated the payment of the bonus, and facilitated the post-WWII GI Bill and many helpful reforms.

This is not 1932.

We are not protesting Capitol Hill demanding Congressional action while living in a tent city on the Potomac – perhaps we should be.

Far too many veterans and military families are not receiving rightfully earned, urgently needed care.

This is wrong: it is as wrong today as it was wrong then.

When America breaks a promise to one veteran, America breaks her promise to all veterans – when one veteran is dishonored, we dishonor all.

It took veterans to change national policy; it will require our involvement again. It is our responsibility to help our brothers and sisters – our responsibility.

For those of us who have survived war are not freed of our responsibilities once we take our uniform off for the last time: to the contrary – we are responsible for standing up for the men and women who are still standing a post, patrolling the seas, securing our skies.

Now is the time for us to work in common cause. All of us must do what we can, where we can, for as long as we can.

It is time for us to hold our leaders and ourselves accountable for making America fulfill her promise.

It is time for veterans to lead – to organize- to prepare for our newest mission.

We swore an oath to defend this country against all enemies, foreign as well as domestic – we have a long journey, a big job to get done – let us begin with restoring trust with our veterans.

All of us must find ways to reengage, reinvest, and reconstitute our America: for we are still the indispensable nation.

America is better than this: we can be so much more than we are, we can realize our promise, provide opportunity, protect freedom, feed the hungry, educate our young, defeat disease, and reach for the stars – and we can care for those we send into danger. We can reclaim our America blessed by the Almighty – sustained through the courage of generations past, present, and future.

We need your help now, today, to push for meaningful reforms at the national, state, and local levels.

Here in Oregon we need you in the Capitol – sharing your stories, telling your truths – we need you in the conversation – your personal involvement will transform the process.

We can reform our policies and restore our ideals – we can write a new chapter of our American story – together. It starts here, today, from within our hearts – within our ranks.

Let us seize this moment – this Veterans Day – to reawaken our spirit and assemble for one more battle: it is time to stand and fight for our America – we start with keeping faith with our veterans.

This is our moral obligation – this is our moment – this is our mission.