VETERANS DAY - 2011

Today is our day to remember those who have served and who are still serving. We remember those brave men and women who have served in places such as Gettysburg, Shiloh, Appomattox, San Juan Hill, the trenches of France, the Argonne Forest, Anzio, Rome, the beaches of Normandy, the deserts of Africa, the cane fields of the Philippines, the rice paddies and jungles of Guam, Okinawa, Japan, Korea and Vietnam, and in places like Panama, Somalia, Haiti, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Comment [A1]: Note to Speakers: Personalize opening remarks and ecognize guests.

We remember those who are part of our history and those who are presently serving to protect our future. Being a Soldier was never an easy job, but the Soldiers in today's All-Volunteer Army chose to serve a cause greater than themselves; many made this decision knowing they may be sent in harm's way. For the better part of a decade they have endured multiple tours – protecting us from danger and giving others the opportunity to live life in security.

Over the last TEN years our Army has proven itself in one of the most difficult environment this nation has ever faced. Our leaders at every level have displayed unparalleled ingenuity, flexibility and adaptability.

Our Soldiers have displayed mental and physical toughness, but most importantly, courage under fire. They have transformed the Army into the most versatile, agile, rapidly deployable and sustainable strategic land force the world has ever known.

I am so proud to be part of that Army every day, but especially today, I am proud I have the opportunity to serve with these great men and women, the next greatest generation.

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On Veterans Day, I think about the ONE point ONE million men and women we have in uniform today who are part of that next greatest generation. These men and women live by a professional ethos that asserts "we will never accept defeat". I think about Sergeant First Class Leroy Petry learning to use a prosthetic hand, Colonel Greg Gadson learning to use prosthetic legs, and Captain Scott Smiley learning to live without eyesight. I think about a lone sentinel standing watch at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier during a hurricane. Many veterans, like these, do remarkable things like this every day.

These Soldiers don't see themselves as being brave or special, they just say they're doing their jobs. Many of our Soldiers have deployed multiple times and many who were injured during these deployments want to go back, not for a sense of revenge, but out a sense of teamwork and duty. They fight for our security in an unsecured world, because that's what they promised they would do.

Our democracy depends on the willingness of its finest men and women to step forward and to serve, to dedicate themselves to a greater cause, the cause of protecting our democracy. For more than two centuries, the veterans of our nation have been willing to serve and to sacrifice for a country and a cause they love more than their own lives. This has not changed.

The image of a veteran, however, has changed in the last TEN years. Almost half of those serving in the military are between TWENTY-TWO and THIRTY years old. America has the largest population of young veterans since the Vietnam War. Many of these veterans are now college students, and many of them have families – wives, husbands, children and parents who love and care for these brave veterans.

Being an Army family is hard in its own way. It's never easy to send your son or daughter off to boot camp, to console your children when your wife or husband is deployed or to feel the pain of seeing your loved one injured – or even hearing Taps as they are put to rest. These families do this every day, and today, as we remember and recognize our veterans, we recognize their families who have stood beside our veterans and have served and sacrificed in their own way.

When we think of how much our veterans and their families have done for our nation, how do we honor their sacrifice? How do we celebrate their service? How do we do these things in a meaningful way? How do we make a difference in the lives of the men and women who have made such a difference in our lives?

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As many as there are stories of brave actions of our veterans on the battlefield, there are stories of men and women who have chosen to make a difference in the lives of veterans. Moina (MOY-nah) Michael is a shining example of one of these Americans who are generous with the time and concern for our nation's greatest assets, our veterans and their families.

Moina Michael, a fifty-year old professor at the University of Georgia, who volunteered to support the war effort in World War One, became the driving force between one of the most recognizable veterans benefit programs in the world – the memorial poppy.

The idea for the memorial poppy came to Miss Michael on a Saturday morning in November NINETEEN EIGHTEEN, two days before the Armistice was declared at ELEVEN o'clock on ELEVEN November, after reading the poem ,"In Flanders Fields" by Canadian Army doctor Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae [Muh – CRAY].

McCrae wrote the simple poem moments after watching his friend Lieutenant Alex Helmer die on the battlefield in Belgium, and it became one of the most famous war-time poems ever written.

Moina, like many other Americans, had read this poem many times before, but on this particular day in November, she was transfixed by the last verse –

"To you from failing hands we throw the Torch; be yours to hold it high.

If ye break faith with us who die, we shall not sleep, though poppies grow in Flanders Fields."

At that moment Miss Michael made a personal pledge to 'keep the faith' and vowed always to wear a red poppy of Flanders Fields as a sign of remembrance and as an emblem for "keeping the faith with all who died" and those who continue to serve.

Later that day Moina bought twenty-five artificial red silk poppies with money donated to brighten up the YMCA headquarters. When she returned to duty later that evening, delegates from the YMCA Overseas War Secretaries' conference crowded around her asking for poppies to wear. Keeping one poppy for her coat collar she gave out the rest of the poppies to the enthusiastic delegates.

Since this was the first group-effort asking for poppies to wear in memory of all who serve and sacrifice, she considered this the first sale of the memorial poppy on November NINTH, NINETEEN EIGHTEEN.

For Miss Michael, it was not enough just to sell and wear this symbol of service and sacrifice.

Over the next couple years, Miss Michael taught classes of disabled servicemen at a university where she learned about their needs first hand. This experience gave her the drive to widen the scope of the memorial poppy idea, to develop it so that it could be used to help all servicemen who needed help for themselves and for their dependents. She was not alone in seeing this need.

In NINETEEN TWENTY TWO, the Veterans of Foreign Wars became the first veterans' organization to coordinate a nationwide distribution of poppies, and the poppy soon was adopted as the official memorial flower of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States.

Since then, Buddy Poppies have been assembled by disabled veterans who are paid for their work to provide them with some form of financial assistance, which makes hospital life more tolerable. It was known, for veterans in veterans' hospitals and in state veteran's homes, every day would be Buddy Poppy Day.

Furthermore, poppy assembly is often used as a therapy program to provide exercise for fingers and hands crippled by wounds, disease and the effects of old age. For more than SEVENTY FIVE years, millions of dollars in proceeds from distribution have been used for veteran's welfare or for the well being of their needy dependents and the orphans of veterans.

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Today, multiple veterans organizations in the United States, Britain, Scotland, Ireland, Australia, Canada and many countries around the world sell and wear poppies to raise money to support and remember their veterans.

On Veterans Day, Remembrance Day, Armistice Day or the Day of Peace – this day has many names – the world stops in silence to pay tribute to the heroes of the battlefield who never see themselves as heroes. To that, I say we owe veterans more than our silence, our memories, our thanks.

President Kennedy once said, "As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them."

You may wonder how you can make a difference in the lives of the men and women who have given so much. It is easier than you think.

Encourage businesses to hire a wounded warrior or military family member: Many wounded warriors separate from the Army and look for productive employment when they come back to their communities. The leadership and technical skills we develop in the military make us valuable additions to any organization.

Spread the Word: If you know of an organization that wants to help veterans, encourage them to register with the National Resource Directory so wounded, ill, and injured service members and their families can access information about the services you provide.

Volunteer in Your Community: Get involved with local organizations in your hometown to make a difference in the lives of wounded warriors and their families.

I encourage you to see the changing face of veterans and see how you could help them. On this Veterans Day, I ask you not just to utter words of thanks to our veterans, but let your actions be the torch that you hold high. As John McCrae's tribute to his friend in "Flanders Field" inspired a movement to improve the lives of veterans, let YOUR words bring forth action. Think of their service and their sacrifice. Don't just say "thank you" to our veterans, show it.