

Good morning everyone. Thank you so much for having me here. It is humbling to speak to you today. While I am a veteran, I'm also a brother to someone in the military and a friend to many who are still serving. I also wear a memorial bracelet every day in remembrance of one of my best friends who was killed in Afghanistan. There are no words that I can say that will sufficiently honor the service and sacrifice of our veterans. So instead of talking about my service, I much rather talk about the incredible Americans I look up to, the ones I led, and the ones I worked with because these are the people I believe our children need to learn about.

There are many professions and occupations that are essential to our way of life. But to secure and protect this, Americans have been fighting for our country for over 240 years. We as a nation have established that there are some things worth fighting and dying for. President Reagan said "You and I know do not believe that life is so dear and peace so sweet as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery. If nothing in life is worth dying for, when did this begin -- just in the face of this enemy? Should the patriots at Concord Bridge have thrown down their guns and refused to fire the shot heard 'round the world? The martyrs of history were not fools." As much as I believe this, I am aware that this is easy for me to say. It is easy to say some things in life are worth fighting and dying for when it is not your kid or your spouse that is raising their right hand to support and defend our Constitution. On Veterans Day, we take a pause to remember and honor the men and women who did raise their right hand, writing a blank check to the United States of America for up to and including their lives.

Throughout our history, we as Americans have always aimed high and dreamed big. When we had a vision and hoped for a better day, it was the veteran who fought and died during the struggle and the pursuit of these dreams. Whether it was our independence, ending slavery and two world wars, containing communism, fighting the global war on terrorism, or being prepared for the unknown, we owe our American way of life and the world we live in today to the veterans who carried our ideals with them into harm's way. Yet, most Americans' focus on Veterans Day will be elsewhere.

Why is this? Today, the average American does not know a service member or a veteran. Only .4% of the American population currently serves on active military duty and according to the VA in 2014, 7.3% of the American people are veterans.

When September 11<sup>th</sup> occurred, I watched a generation of Americans stand up and run towards the violence to bring the architects of September 11<sup>th</sup> to justice. Jonathan Pruden was one of these Americans. Pruden was 25 when he went to Iraq in 2003. He was one of the first victims of an improvised explosive device, known as an IED, that detonated underneath his vehicle as he was on a mission in Baghdad. He was hit with 173 pieces of shrapnel and had his right leg amputated after 18 surgeries. As if his military service was not enough, Jonathan has worked for Wounded Warrior Project in Florida since 2007 where he helps our wounded veterans.

When people doubt the successful future of our country, they just don't know where to look. At West Point, I met classmates who turned down offers from places like Harvard and Stanford because they wanted to receive the best education and training to prepare them to lead Soldiers as Army officers. Kristen Greist was one of them. She is one of the most physically fit people I know, yet the army did not let her choose a combat position because she was a woman. So she became a military police officer, and led a platoon in Afghanistan. In 2015, she was the one of the first two women to graduate the U.S. Army's ranger school, a school that

formerly only allowed men. Fortune Magazine ranked her 34<sup>th</sup> in 2016 on the list of World's Greatest Leaders and is now an Infantry Officer, doing what she is meant to do.

After graduating from West Point, I had the honor and privilege of being a platoon leader to a platoon of scouts and infantrymen who were some of the bravest and most inspiring Soldiers a young lieutenant could ask for. They were combat arms Soldiers. What that means is when they decided to join the army, they did not ask to be a mail clerk or an intel analyst. They volunteered to be in the fight. They wanted a job that when you heard the enemy attack, they moved to the sound of the guns. They came from all walks of life from around the country: black, white, rich, poor, Christians, nonbelievers, democrats, republicans, married, single. But the funny thing is, none of that mattered. We were a team and we needed each member on that team to ensure we brought everyone home. I am not sure if I will ever have a job that will mean as much to me as being those soldiers' platoon leader.

While many families including mine were lucky to drop the weight of anxiety and concern off their shoulders, some families' greatest nightmares came true. While on patrol with one of our sister platoons, SFC Forrest Robertson was hit with a machine gun round that struck him right above the side plate of his body armor. He was killed November 3<sup>rd</sup>. And We came home 23 days later. He was married with 3 little girls and had already deployed multiple times prior into harm's way.

Last November, my best friend Andrew Ross was killed when he was conducting combat operations as a special forces team leader in Ghazni Province, Afghanistan. I miss him every single day and am terrified that time will fade my memory of him. I thought it was important that I read to you a portion of the letter Drew wrote to his wife in the event something would happen to him. One of the reasons I love you so much is you understand my sense of duty. Many men don't believe in the fight we're in anymore, but I do. I am a man that believes I died for something greater than myself. If you're reading this it's because I gave all I had for this country, my brothers, my family, but most importantly for you. I love what I do. I love everything my nation stands for. As I write this my heart is breaking . . . but I don't regret it." As you can tell, Drew loved our country with his whole heart. Drew's words are a constant reminder to me of the incredible people that put on the uniform to ensure we can go about our normal lives.

In the WW2 film, Saving Private Ryan, Tom Hanks' character, Captain Miller, led a team of army rangers to find Matt Damon's character, Private Ryan, and bring him home because all of Private Ryan's brothers were killed in the war. In the final scene, Captain Miller is dying and whispers to Private Ryan to "Earn this." Surely, Private Ryan did not need to earn anything. He had already parachuted into German-occupied France, had fought just as bravely as anyone else, and lost all of his brothers in the war. Yet, Private Ryan made sure to live the rest of his life in a way that he "earned" it. I believe the lesson for us—the best way we can honor our veterans—is to earn it. How do we do that is a question I will leave for you all to answer yourselves. But I will say this.

I love this country so much not because we are a perfect Union, but because we are working to form a more perfect one. Our military gives us that opportunity. Our veterans safeguarded the American Dream for us to carry with the values of hard work, patriotism, and responsibility. So, the fate of our country depends on us, the People, not our government or our politicians. In fact, presidents mention this on a consistent basis. President Nixon stated, "we need the energies of our people--enlisted not only in grand enterprises, but more

importantly in those small, splendid efforts that make headlines in the neighborhood newspaper instead of the national journal.” Veterans Day is a reminder that we are all on the same team and equally crucial in this American experiment. Surely, we must understand that while our veterans protected our greatest treasures, it is for all of us to hand this great country to our kids. Thank you.