



From the office of Texas Workforce Commission

Chairman Tom Pauken

Speech

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Tom Pauken's Address at the 8th Annual Veterans' Ball in Bellville, TX Saturday, November 20, 2010

It is a great privilege to be here tonight and to be given the opportunity to honor our veterans and the nation they served. It is especially gratifying to be part of an event sponsored by two organizations that I respect so much - the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

As a high school junior in Dallas, Texas, I had the great privilege to participate in the Boys State program sponsored by the American Legion. I have many fond memories from my time at Boys State and learned a great deal from that experience that has served me well in life. Ever since my first encounter with the American Legion, my admiration and respect for this service organization for our veterans has only grown.

Several years after my time at Boys State, I was a young Texan living in Washington, DC and attending graduate school at Georgetown University. I had not yet joined the Army, but I wanted to do something to support our soldiers who were serving our nation in Vietnam. Those as old as myself may remember that members of my own generation were demonizing our soldiers - - with signs at various anti-war demonstrations calling them "baby killers." Some of that '60s generation even supported the other side in that war - - the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Communists.

A few of us organized a national effort to show that the student radicals did not reflect the views of most young Americans. We didn't have much in the way of financial resources, but the national office of the American Legion in Washington, D.C., was there to support our campaign. As a result, our National Student Committee for the Defense of Vietnam presented petitions of support for our soldiers in Vietnam to then Vice President Hubert Humphrey from more than half a million college students across the country.

I subsequently enlisted in the Army and served as a Military Intelligence officer in Vietnam. Returning home was a difficult experience for many of our soldiers who did not receive the warm welcome that previous generations of American soldiers who had served their nation in wartime had received. Vietnam Veterans were regularly depicted in the mainstream media as everything from guilt-ridden victims to drug-crazed psychos. For Vietnam Veterans, it wasn't just the unfair depictions in the media that we had to contend with. That mindset of blaming the warrior for the war resulted in many of our returning soldiers not even putting on their resumes that they had served in the military in Vietnam for fear that it would cost them the opportunity to get a job in the civilian sector. But our veteran service organizations were there to assist our returning veterans from Vietnam. I will always be grateful to those at VFW Post 6796 on Garland Road in Dallas, Texas who provided such a warm welcome to myself and other returning veterans from Vietnam.

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In 1981, we decided to do something about the negative and false stereotyping of those who had served our country honorably in Vietnam. As Director of the Action agency, and with the strong support of President Reagan, I established the Vietnam Veterans Leadership Program. The program was created for Vietnam Veterans and led by Vietnam Veterans who were committed to helping our fellow veterans who were unemployed, underemployed or who had lingering problems associated with their Vietnam experience. In November 1981, Vietnam Veterans gathered on the White House lawn as President Reagan announced the program's launch - - men from all across America, from a variety of backgrounds and races, representing every branch of the military. At the White House that day, a cross-section of America was represented - - just as was the case with the American men and women who served in Vietnam.

We had a simple but powerful theme:

“What does America do with experience like this? Put it to work.”

And so we did. Within the next four years - - thanks to an outstanding leadership team that was spread across the nation - - America responded in a positive way to the call of this program. People began to recognize and value the experience of those young soldiers who had served in Vietnam - - soldiers who went on to make major contributions to the public and private sectors in American society.

Before long, Vietnam Veterans were proudly putting their military service back on their resumes.

Thankfully, times have changed. Veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan are treated with respect by almost all Americans. Regardless of one's position on those conflicts, very few people blame the warrior for the war anymore.

But that does not mean that all is well with this new generation of veterans. And it does not mean that we, as a society and as a nation, have done what justice requires of us in light of the debt we owe these men and women.

Many of these soldiers experienced multiple and extended tours of duty in the war zone. They are all volunteers. More than 40% are from the National Guard or Enlisted Reserve . . . men and women who were pulled away from their civilian jobs or from the small businesses they run for their tours. We Americans appreciate their service, we give them welcome home parades this time around, and then we tend to go about our business . . . forgetting how hard that transition from the military to civilian life can be for those who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan . . . and not taking into account the value of that experience to potential civilian employers.

These soldiers have returned home to face the worst economy since the Great Depression - - and it's hitting them even harder than the rest of the population.

Today's veterans often face considerable obstacles in the labor market which many are entering for the first time. Indeed, the unemployment rate for young veterans consistently has exceeded the rate for young nonveterans.

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That is why Governor Perry and I established the Texas Veterans Leadership Program which helps veterans find employment and get the help that they need to make a successful transition to civilian life. The program is run by returning veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan and is headed by a retired Marine Gunnery Sergeant named Jason Doran who was awarded the Silver Star for bravery in Iraq.

The program assigns a Veteran Representative to each of the 28 local workforce development areas across the state. Each of these specialists are themselves a veteran of the conflict in Iraq or Afghanistan and they work to find veterans in the community who are in need of assistance and make sure these veterans are able to utilize a broad array of resources that can assist them in making the transition back to civilian life.

We work closely with organizations like the American Legion and the VFW to assist these returning veterans. That's how we were able to help Francisco De La Garza who was out of work for nine months after leaving the military. Thankfully, he found a job; but he had accumulated so much debt during his time of unemployment that he was having trouble keeping his head above water - - even as he worked 60 to 90 hours a week.

One of our Veteran Resource reps met with Francisco and told him that the VFW's Unmet Needs Program might be able to help. The specialist helped Francisco fill out the paper work and in less than a month he had received checks from the VFW which allowed him to get out of debt and get solvent again. Without the VFW, this hardworking veteran might have given up hope. Thanks to your help, Francisco De La Garza and his family are back on their feet again.

It's all about veterans helping veterans. Something that you, as active members of the American Legion and the VFW, do every day for our fellow veterans.

I am proud of the work being done by the Texas Veterans Leadership program but it is just one part of the response to our new veterans that is needed. One of the great success stories of the Vietnam Veterans Leadership Program was the number of leaders who were nurtured and came out of the program. The halls of government used to be filled with former soldiers whose experience fighting overseas gave them special insight into public policy. Unfortunately, the number of veterans in positions to shape public policy seems to be dwindling. We as a nation benefit when the men and women who have been formed by our military and served as soldiers in our wars are able to contribute to the governing our nation.

I submit to you that our veterans of foreign wars understand better than any other group in our nation "the law of unintended consequences" when you put young Americans in harm's way.

I spoke earlier of the requirements of justice and I want to elaborate on what I meant by that. The Texas Veterans Leadership Program was not created as a charity program. And it does not exist simply because it makes good business sense to tap the experiences and skills of these veterans. It is a response to the demands of justice which calls on us, as a nation, to repay these soldiers for their service to our nation- - soldiers who left behind their families and good jobs - - soldiers who placed themselves in harm's way when they answered

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our country's call in difficult times. They made these sacrifices for the good of the country. Although we can never fully repay them, at least we must try to welcome them home the best we can by putting their experience to work.

Then, there are those soldiers who made the ultimate sacrifice and should always be in our memory. Two and a half million Americans served in Vietnam, and more than fifty-seven thousand paid the ultimate price in that war. Let us remember all our soldiers who have died fighting for America in all our wars - - particularly those who gave their lives in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In closing, let me quote from "One Father's Words", a letter a dying father from Brenham, Texas (just a few miles away from here) wrote to his son, Tieman Dipple. This brief excerpt from that letter provides good guidance for us as our nation wrestles with so many serious problems.

"The time that we spend on earth is relatively small in comparison with the great movement of history. All we can do in our life span is to make the world better than when we first arrived. All fortunes ultimately are dispersed, but the ideas and values that you leave to society can live forever... We must try to make every generation's character better than the one before it and build a higher standard of living through wise policies."

It is not about Right vs. Left. It is about Up or Down. If nothing is done, the American dream will die for future generations. Are we going to change course and make America an even greater land of opportunity than it was for us and those who came before us? Or, are we going to go the way of so many other great nations throughout history that stumbled, declined, and fell – never to recover.

The choice is ours.

American veterans need to take the lead in helping our nation find its way back to our founding principles of faith, family, country, and freedom.

Thanks for all you do to honor our veterans - - both the living and the dead.

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The Texas Workforce Commission is a state agency dedicated to helping Texas employers, workers and communities prosper economically. For details on TWC and the programs it offers in unison with its network of local workforce development boards, call (512) 463-8556 or visit www.texasworkforce.org.