**The American Legion**

**94th Birthday**

**2013**

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It was an historic event sponsored by a venerable and cherished institution.

On January 21st, The American Legion sponsored its ‘Salute to Heroes Inaugural Ball” in our nation’s capital. True to our founders’ insistence that the The American Legion remain nonpartisan --- the event was not to honor any politician or political party – but instead was a recognition for the gallant heroes who have made it possible for us to hold free elections in the greatest republic on earth.

Twenty-five Medal of Honor recipients representing various wars were the special guests – and they were joined by the author of The Greatest Generation, former NBC News Anchorman Tom Brokaw.

This was one of many milestones in the 94-year-history of the nation’s largest veterans organization.

From authoring the GI Bill to the creation of the Department of Veteran Affairs, The American Legion has impacted the lives of veterans like no other organization.

National Commander James E. Koutz (Cow tz) often says “Every Day is Veterans Day” and his organization proves it through the daily action performed by Legion service officers and volunteers throughout the nation and at posts overseas.

But service to veterans is only one of the missions of The American Legion, as Brokaw reminded us at the Salute to Heroes.

“I’m of the generation in which we would say to one another, ‘It takes The American Legion to raise a child,” Brokaw told the gathering. He added – quote- “When I was growing up…when you wanted to get something done, you turned to the Legion. They sponsored my Boy Scout troop. I played American Legion Baseball, and I was elected Boys State governor in South Dakota in 1957.” Unquote.

You may not need The American Legion to raise your child, but the children and youth programs sponsored by the Legion are second-to-none. The American Legion has supported the Boy Scouts of America since 1919 and, today, along with the American Legion Auxiliary and Sons of The American Legion, charters more than 2,500 Scouting units comprised of nearly 70,000 young men and women.

And our support has made a difference to the recipients of The American Legion Child Welfare Foundation grants, which are used to educate the public about childhood diseases such as juvenile diabetes, Marfan Syndrome and autism.

We also support the Children’s Miracle Network, and that support has undoubtedly saved countless young lives.

The American Legion does these things not because it can, but because it’s who we are. We were founded by a group of World War I veterans on four pillars – veterans, youth, national defense and Americanism.

On these pillars – we will never waver.

Not only have we defended our nation in war, but we continue to fight against defense cuts that we believe will decimate our military.

Military drawdowns may save money, but they often cost American lives as we have seen during the failed Iranian hostage rescue attempt of 1980 and Task Force Smith during the Korean War. The U.S. military has now been engaged in war for the past 12 years, which has caused equipment shortages and the extension of existing equipment to well beyond its useful lifespan.

The American Legion believes that you cannot just simply say that you support veterans unless you also support our current military. You do not send troops to war unless you can give them the equipment and resources that they need to succeed.

We also have a moral obligation to the young people whose parents have made the ultimate sacrifice during the war on terrorism. The American Legion’s Legacy Scholarship was created to help pay for the college educations of those who lost a military parent serving since 9/11.

We also provide support to veterans recovering in military hospitals and transition units through The American Legion Operation Comfort Warriors program. Re-integration into society is a huge challenge that these veterans face. We should serve them as well as they have served us.

And let us not forget The American Legion’s duty to promote Americanism. Whether it’s teaching flag etiquette to children or building a memorial to fallen heroes, veterans know that freedom is not free and that patriotism must be cultivated and nourished if it is to last.

That is why The American Legion continues to fight for the flag of the United States and ensure that it gets the constitutional protection that it deserves.

If it’s revered enough to place on a hero’s coffin, it is important enough to protect from physical desecration.

Congress should not stand with the One Percent who disrespect Old Glory but with the 99 percent who honor it.

It often takes a veteran to remind the public of the sacrifices those in uniform and their families continue to make. The American Legion is a central player in Blue Star Salutes and other patriotic and troop-support events held in hundreds of communities across our great nation every year.

We continue to serve veterans even when the fighting ends. Past National Commander Harry Colmery, the author of America’s greatest piece of social legislation, knew that it was right for America to aid returning war veterans by making it possible for them to obtain formal educations, get jobs and purchase homes.

While others scoffed that such a benefit would “break the treasury,” The American Legion held firm and ensured the passage of the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, also known as the GI Bill of Rights.

But The American Legion did not rest on its laurels, even after that significant and historical accomplishment.

We played a pivotal role in the creation of the new post-9/11 GI Bill, which allows recent veterans to transfer their benefits to family members if they choose to do so.

The American Legion has thousands of service officers deployed across the country – all eager to assist any veteran with a benefit claim, free of charge, regardless of Legion membership.

We are there when natural disasters hit, awarding National Emergency Fund grants to Legion members and their posts, often within a few short days of the request.

Ladies and gentlemen, to give you an idea of why The American Legion exists and why we proudly observe the birthday of this great organization, let us reflect on the Preamble to the Constitution of The American Legion.

“For God and Country, We associate ourselves together for the following purposes:

To uphold and defend the Constitution of the United States of America; to maintain law and order; to foster and perpetuate a one hundred percent Americanism; to preserve the memories and incidents of our associations in the Great Wars; to inculcate a sense of individual obligation to the community, state and nation; to combat the autocracy of both the classes and the masses; to make right the master of might; to promote peace and good will on earth; to safeguard and transmit to posterity the principles of justice, freedom and democracy; to consecrate and sanctify our comradeship by our devotion to mutual helpfulness.”

 On the 143rd anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the brand new American Legion published its vision statement in the July 4th, 1919 issue of its weekly publication. Titled the “Spirit of the Legion,” it said: “The American Legion is the epitome of that Americanism for which it stands. Its voice is the majority voice of its members; its will – the will of the many. Spontaneous in inception, it has been democratic in its development. There are no titles recorded on its rolls. It is free of rank, of cast – and of partisanship. If it seeks in a full measure to serve those who were in service, it seeks in fuller measure to serve America.

In this spirit, The American Legion has entered upon its mission.”

Legionnaires among us today --- let us continue this noble mission.

God Bless you and God Bless America!

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