

Thank you for the opportunity to march with you and to speak. But I thank you even more, each and every one of you, for being here to remember.

We remember all those who have served our country and the countless others who have supported them -- their families, their friends and all Americans. Actions truly speak louder than words. Let me tell you that your coming together here today for reflection, for remembrance, for showing respect to those who have died in service, and to those who have served our country, speaks volumes: And the theme of my short remarks is to ask, as we do this, to consider also how important this service is to the future of our country.

We Americans, since the birth of our nation, come from a long tradition of free and private civilian life, interrupted at times to take up arms to serve our country, and then, when the danger has passed, returning to our civilian lives. We have never embraced a “warrior” caste.

We believe – and history has proven – that the strength of our military and the success of our democracy comes from the fundamental precept that our military is an instrumentality of elected and appointed civilian government, meaning command and control by a civilian Commander-in-Chief, funding and oversight by a civilian Congress, and administration by civilian secretaries of defense, the armed services, and homeland security.

This very community of Simsbury helped establish that tradition nearly 250 years ago. At the time of the American Revolution Simsbury citizens ---- farmers and merchants but civilians all, became our first patriots when they took up arms and went off to fight to be free of tyrannical British colonial rule. Nearly 1,000 Simsbury residents, more than have served in any other war since, left their homes and families to serve in that first fight, the Revolution. One hundred Simsbury soldiers faced the British in the Battle of Bunker Hill. Among Simsbury's heroes, perhaps the best known of all, was Noah Phelps.

Many of you know of his life. His family settled here in 1750. His mother was Abigail Pettibone, also a familiar name here in our town. He was a lawyer, magistrate, and probate judge. It was his resourcefulness that led to the capture of Fort Ticonderoga by General Ethan Allen and his Green Mountain Boys. Captain Phelps had been sent to reconnoiter the southern part of Lake Champlain. While spending the night at a farm house nearby the fort, he overheard British soldiers talking about the poor condition of the fort. The next morning, posing as a peddler seeking a shave, Phelps managed to enter the fort. He saw that the exterior wall was in poor condition and could be breached easily. It was this intelligence that enabled Ethan Allen to take the fort with no casualties in a surprise dawn raid.

Noah Phelps then raised a militia company at his own expense and led these troops in the later battles of Trenton and Princeton. On his tombstone is inscribed: "A Patriot of 1776. To such we are indebted for our Independence." How true, but what an understatement, in the long view of our history since.

What lesson may we learn from the service of these earliest patriots and from all those who have followed them in uniform? I submit to you it is this: Each and every one of us has an obligation to come forward, to volunteer, and to serve our country to the extent of our capabilities. If we can, we should serve in the military. We can also serve our country in so many other ways. The only way that we as civilians can truly understand the value of the private and free existence we have enjoyed for so long is to take ourselves out of that private, free existence and to serve. Military service provides an invaluable perspective.

In 1968 I was graduating from college, with a virtual certainty to be drafted and likely to be sent to Vietnam. The country was in turmoil. I was married, I had plans for graduate school. I did not want to go, but I volunteered. It was one of the best things I ever did in my life. I spent 31 years of active and reserve time in the Navy including three tours in Vietnam. I was fortunate in that I was never in combat, but I think any combat veteran will tell you that it is the service, apart from the greater sacrifice of combat, that provides the perspective I speak of.

It was only in serving that I was able to fully appreciate the devotion of those who serve, who wear the uniform, who are willing to step up and do more with less, and the suffering that they and their families and their friends and their supporters shared and endured.

I love the Navy. It has become my second family. Nothing in my life has come close to equaling the comradery that I and every member of the military service experience. There is a special bond between service members.

Today, when I show my military identification card for some discount, and a clerk says "Thank you for your service" I appreciate that, but I say to myself, I am the one who is truly thankful for the opportunity to have served. I would not trade that experience for anything.

The importance of civilians taking up arms and serving in the military and then returning to their civilian pursuits simply did not occur to me as I entered the Navy in 1968.

It was not until years later, after 7 years of active duty and a decade as a drilling reservist, when I was at the Minute Man National Historical Park in Concord, Massachusetts, for the annual celebration of the battle at Meriam's Corner that I realized why it just seemed so right that I should serve and continue to be ready to be called.

Meriam's Corner is my family homestead and it was at that place on the morning of April 19, 1775 and all along Battle Road, that 1,172 Minute Men, reinforcements from 20 something towns, engaged the British Regulars as they retreated from the skirmish at the North Bridge. Those civilian Minute Men had walked or ridden all night after receiving the alarm from Paul Revere, William Dawes and Dr. Samuel Prescott. All civilians, all volunteers, all men who took up arms when given the call, all who walked and rode all night to fight and perhaps to give their lives for their freedom.

There is a very troubling trend in this country away from military service. For some reason, we ask fewer Americans to sacrifice more, as if the success of the armed service lies in not including many citizens. I submit that civilians distancing themselves from the military poses great risks for America. During wars we have had large build ups, but apart from the times of actual conflict, if you look back over time you will see much higher proportions of Americans served in these times of need. Consider just these snapshots of the percentage of Americans on active duty in a given year, not all the years involved in encompassing the wars: 8.6% in 1945, down to 1% in 1950, 1.5% in 1970. Then it was 0.5% in 2000 - a time of no wars or conflicts. But remarkably it is even less than that one-half of one percent today.

Consider the recent survey by the Pew Research Center which dramatically shows how distant we as civilians are becoming from those who serve in our military:

Three-quarters of Americans over 50 years old – my generation -- have an immediate family member who has served in the military; three out of four. However among those ages 18 to 29, it has fallen to just one-third, or one in three. The report observes that “the gap between veterans and the general public in the share that has family connections to the military may be a relatively new phenomenon. With the shrinking size of the military in recent decades there are now fewer connections between the military and the civilian world.”

The best way that each and every one of you can show your support for those who have served and sacrificed and those who will serve is to step up and volunteer and enter military service. It might be six months of active duty and follow-on service in the guard or reserves. It might be two years or three years or four years or 10 or 20 or more. What is so important today is for we as civilians to support our country by serving if we can.

And it is for us as grandparents and parents and husbands and wives and fathers and mothers and sisters and brothers and all manner of family and friends to not only support those who choose to serve but to encourage all to serve if they can.

Yes, it is frightening to consider the risks of military service and to intentionally put ourselves and those we love in harm's way, but we will continue to be the great country we are, and we will protect our freedom, and we will be able to help others around the world gain theirs, if we support our military services by serving, by urging all to serve, and by supporting their decision to do so.

God bless those men and women who sacrificed their lives for us. God bless our veterans, and their families for their support and sacrifice here at home. And God bless all of you families and supporters of our veterans.