

Service and Freedom

I am afraid that many Americans take our freedom for granted. Americans are privileged to live in the 'land of the free and the home of the brave.' Many assume that the freedoms that presently exist will continue far into the future.

Depending upon one's age, parents or grandparents served in the armed forces during WWII or worked on the home front to provide food and supplies for the war effort. Tom Brokaw has labeled these men and women as "The Greatest Generation." This generation grew up during the Great Depression and went on to fight WWII or provide labor to produce materials for the war effort. Everyone contributed in one way or another.

My parents were part of that generation. Until Brokaw's book, I characterized them as 'old school.' My family adhered to the idea that success could be obtained according to the principles of liberty, hard work, responsibility, and the free market that we enjoy in this nation. My parents were strict and demanding. They had great faith in God and were equally committed to those principles of charitable giving and work. My parents and grandparents taught my siblings and me that our primary responsibilities were providing for and protecting our families and liberty and that those responsibilities should never be influenced by emotion or superficial issues. Through word and deed, they taught that our obligations should be guided by steadfast, fundamental principles, and by the hard cold logic attendant to them. I thank my grandparents and parents for teaching me that you have to believe in and work for what you have.

I grew up in the '50s. I was not old enough to understand that a military conflict raged in far-off Korea. The Korean War ended before I even realized that it existed. As I became older, I became enamored with two television series: 'Victory at Sea' and 'AirPower.' Both TV series portrayed the fighting and the home front experiences during WWII and the Korean War. My parents would often watch these series with me. For me, I was watching an exciting historical TV series or documentary. For my parents, they were reliving real-life events. Occasionally, an observation would be made about some remembrance, which made me realize that my parents had lived through those events. Their comments made a personal connection for me. Not only did I learn about history from a first-hand perspective, but I also learned some important life lessons.

I entered and served in the U.S. Air Force for 26 years. I experienced good and bad aspects of military service. I learned a commitment to something bigger than myself. I discovered service beyond self.

In the '60s, a draft existed such that all able-bodied young men had an obligation to help defend this country. Many, if most, did not relish service in the military, but most accepted military conscription as part of the responsibility for living in a free country. Some would extend or stay in the military. Most would return to civilian life—a job or additional schooling. However, each individual experienced and learned what was required to maintain and protect this country, this way of life—America's freedom.

That compulsory 'learning experience or environment' does not exist today. Only about 1 to 1 ½ percent of Americans currently serve in the military. A considerable disconnect occurs between those that serve to protect, defend, and provide freedom to those that enjoy the benefits of freedom.

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Since this 'learning environment' no longer exists for most young people, a road map needs to be provided to show young people how to support freedom. 'Old School' principles need to be revitalized and re-adopted. It is our obligation, today's parents and grandparents, to help modern youth understand the importance of supporting this country and freedom. One does not have to enlist in the military to support and fight for freedom. History and civic lessons need to be taught and learned—more than just facts, figures, and dates—lessons about how and why various leaders, governments, and peoples made decisions that impacted not only their generation but future generations. Parents, grandparents, and teachers have a responsibility to mentor young people and instill a passion for service, be it military or public, into the hearts and minds of young men and women. Young lives need to be shaped through wisdom, kindness, and the awe-inspiring dignity of older generations.

America is one of the greatest countries for many reasons. Over the years, in wartime and peace, men and women, in and out of uniform, have willingly sacrificed their time, talents, and even their lives, so that freedom and peace can endure domestically and abroad. May we recognize and acknowledge such people and skills. Let us be thankful for our ancestors' commitment and compel ourselves to be unflinching as they.

Let us heed President Regan's warning and teach the next generations the value of individual freedom so that they won't lose it. Let's teach them that preserving freedom is not always easy, but that once freedom is lost, it is even more challenging to regain.