

Veteran's Day 2017

Elected officials, honored guests, Father Enright, Chaplain Fulmer, fellow citizens, and my brother and sister veterans – good morning and Happy Veteran's Day. To all of the Marines in attendance, Happy Birthday. Thank you for joining us today as we take pause from our hectic lives to continue a 98 year old tradition in our City, County and Country.

On the 11th hour, of the 11th day, of the 11th month of 1918, an armistice between Germany and the Allied nations went into effect, marking the end of hostilities between the warring nations. One year later, President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed November 11th as Armistice Day, and in doing so, said the following:

“To us in America, the reflections of Armistice Day will be filled with lots of pride in the heroism of those who died in the country's service and with gratitude for the victory, both because of the thing from which it has freed us and because of the opportunity it has given America to show her sympathy with peace and justice in the councils of nations.”

President Wilson believed World War I was the “war to end all wars,” and it was his hope that from the death and destruction a new world order would emerge, one that was dedicated to peace and justice, with America leading the rest of the world by her shining example.

Unfortunately, Wilson's vision never came to fruition, and 20 years later the world was once again engulfed in the flames of war. Millions of American men and women once again answered their nation's call to duty. American ingenuity, determination, conviction and sacrifice rid the world of Nazism and Fascism, and set the example for the rest of the world as a nation and people dedicated to freedom, prosperity and democracy.

Recognizing the sacrifices that Americans had made in two world wars and the fragility of peace around the globe, America committed herself in the post-World War II era to protecting peace and justice throughout the world, rather than returning to our tradition of complete demobilization and isolationism.

In the seven decades since the end of World War II, generation after generation of Americans have risen to this challenge and committed themselves to military service, in both times of war and times of peace.

Throughout the remainder of the 20th Century and in the infancy of the 21st Century Americans have repeatedly defended our freedom and way of life. From the frozen terrain of Korea, to the sweltering jungles of Vietnam and Panama, to the sand strewn deserts of the Middle East and to the mountains of Afghanistan, the men and women of our armed forces have time and again selflessly risked their lives for each and every one of us.

We as a nation rightfully honor our war veterans, especially the many thousands who have paid the ultimate sacrifice for our freedom. There is never anything that we can sufficiently do to thank them.

What often goes unnoticed are the contributions of our veterans beyond those on the battlefield. Our Democracy, even at 241 years old, is still a work in progress. Each and every veteran who has ever worn the uniform has contributed to this great experiment, both directly and indirectly, as the military has often served as a catalyst for reform and furthering democratic ideals, here at home.

In 1948, 83 years after the end of the Civil War, much of our nation and many of its institutions were still segregated, including the military. President Harry Truman, at the urging of civil rights activist A. Philip Randolph, took the bold step of issuing a directive to the Secretary of Defense to eliminate as quickly as possible discrimination in the armed forces. This process was by no means instantaneous, in fact, it took several years to carry out. But the success of this action proved that American institutions can be strengthened by enacting basic principles of inclusion. The armed forces set the example for the rest of American society.

Following WWII, through the GI Bill of Rights, veterans attended college at an unprecedented rate. This program single handedly transformed the higher education system in our country by making a college education attainable for many who would have never of had the option.

54 years after the passage of the Equal Pay Act, women in the United States still face a substantial gender wage gap. On average, a woman, today, in 2017, earns 79 cents for every dollar a man earns. That is not the case in the military, where pay is based on rank and time of service, rather than gender; once again setting the example for the rest of society.

I believe that military service changes the individual as well. I know that my time and experiences in the Air Force were a significant factor in making me who I am today. I was lucky enough to be raised by parents and a large extended family who instilled in me not only a strong work ethic, a sense of respect and decency, but empathy and compassion for others; my service only reinforced that.

There were the obvious things that I learned:

- You can't do everything on your own
- Confidence is king - don't waiver - be decisive
- Sleep when the opportunity presents itself
- Value and learn from the experiences of others
- You always have something more to give
- Appearance matters
- Value and trust your friends

All of these values are important, and have served me well; but the education I received during my time in service goes much deeper than that.

Like most Auburnians I was raised in a working class family and although not wealthy, we never really lacked for anything. It was during my enlistment that I experienced true poverty for the first time.

The first morning of basic training we marched to supply to get issued our uniforms. During this process we were given three pairs of shoes: combat boots, class A dress shoes, and running shoes. The Airman in line in front of me looked back at me in disbelief and said that growing up he was lucky if he had one pair of shoes, let alone three. This same Airman was shocked when we went to the chow hall for the first time – he could not believe the amount of food that he was given.

Since this experience the awareness of poverty has stayed with me as has my belief that it has no place in our society.

In the spring of 1996 I, along with several of my fellow airmen, received orders to Spokane, Washington. We were told that if we drove, they would give us five travel days, so six of us decided to make a road trip out of it. We drove from Wichita to Spokane and one night decided to stay in Wyoming. We checked into our hotel rooms and walked across the street to grab some dinner. I was the first one to the door and I opened it, and my buddies all started walking in. The last two stopped and refused to go in.

When I asked them what they were doing they told me that they couldn't go in and we had to leave. I didn't quite understand until I turned around and realized we were standing in front of a large window and just about every person in the restaurant was staring at us. I quickly realized that they were staring at us because the two young men who I mentioned, were African American.

I was enraged. I wanted to go in that restaurant and sit down and eat because they had every right to. These two men were serving their country, and one of them had just returned from a six month deployment to Saudi Arabia. They looked at me and said "Gino, we don't want any trouble, let's just leave." It was then that I realized they had been experiencing this their entire lives and it was something that they had just learned to live with.

I honored my friends' wishes that day; I remained quiet, and we left that restaurant. But I vowed to myself that I would no longer remain quiet when I was faced with instances of racism or bigotry. I would speak up and I would ensure

that my children would be raised to be fair and just, and to treat everyone equally.

After basic training, I went to the Air Force Security Police Academy. While there I met a fellow Airman by the name of Juan Radubalo-Vasquez. Juan had immigrated to the United States from Spain, and was not yet an American citizen. I was naive - I didn't even realize that was allowed.

I got to know Juan and one day we had a conversation and he explained to me that he wanted very much to become an American citizen and he was so thankful for the opportunity presented to him that he felt an obligation to serve the country he wanted to call home. It was then that I realized the allure and promise of America and that for so many around the globe it is a beacon of freedom.

I speak of these experiences because they have had a lasting effect on me. They changed how I viewed and understood the world we live in, and became part of the core values that have guided me throughout my adult life. These core values, coupled with my upbringing, have served me well in private business and as a college professor; they have driven my community involvement; and have most certainly guided me in public office.

I am thankful for the opportunity to have served my country. Next to my family, particularly the two children that my wife Toni and I have been blessed with, my service to our country is the accomplishment that I am most proud of.

Thank you to my colleague, my mentor and my friend, Mayor Michael Quill, for the invitation to speak today, and allowing me to share my experiences.

In closing I would like to leave you with a quote from President John F. Kennedy:

"As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them."

Thank you