

OUR AMERICAN HERITAGE AND THE BLESSINGS OF FREEDOM

By LaVar Christensen

“Old Folks Day” Speech

Draper, Utah

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For more than 100 years, Utah communities such as Draper have gathered for this annual celebration known as “Old Folks Day”. For at least the past 20 years, it has been held in this building on Presidents’ Day. Like President Carl Grossen who joins us today, I too enjoyed attending this wonderful gathering each year while serving in the Hidden Valley Stake Presidency from 1991 to 2000. Some of the past speakers I remember most have sadly passed on. I loved Gerald Smith and can still see his face and hear the sound of his voice as he stood at this pulpit and shared his memories of life in Draper. He titled his typed remarks that day – “Hey Grandpa, you wanna buy my computer?”

As I watched you come in today and greet one another, I can see how much Draper has grown but it still has that special small town and close knit feeling because of lasting traditions such as today's reunion and celebration. It reminds me of the poem by **Edgar Guest** called "*First Name Friends.*"

[Poem was read]

Today is a time for personal reflection. It is a day when we pause to count our blessings and express appreciation for one another and our cherished liberties as Americans. **John Quincy Adams spoke to us over two centuries ago when he said, "Posterity—you will never know how much it has cost my generation to preserve your freedom. I hope you will make good use of it."** If there ever was a generation of citizens who truly know and understand the cost of freedom, it is you who are assembled here today.

The World War II generation has been called the "greatest generation." However, I don't think you or any generation would make such comparisons or claim any degree of supremacy. Your generation is much too humble and selfless for that. But **we who bask in the legacy you have left us know and gratefully acknowledge that in your lifetime, the forces of good and evil collided on the world stage in a way that threatened our civilization. Your generation, said President Franklin Roosevelt, had a "rendezvous with**

destiny.” You met it head on with courage, immense sacrifice and faith in the same “Divine Providence” that sustained the founders of our Republic.

At a critical early moment in the War when it appeared that France would fall, the world wondered if England could persevere and prevail in the defense of freedom. Winston Churchill went to the public airwaves and rallied his countrymen and the free world. He described the crisis in these memorable words:

Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilization. Upon it depends our own British life, and the long continuity of our institutions and our Empire. The whole fury and might of the enemy must very soon be turned on us.

Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this Island or lose the war. If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be free and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands. But if we fail, then the whole world, including the United States, including all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science.

Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, 'THIS was their finest hour.'

When “V-DAY” finally came and Allied soldiers everywhere joyously returned home to a universal heroes welcome, Churchill would later write with great foresight concerning the challenges that would yet face future generations:

‘.....AND THUS “THE GREAT DEMOCRACIES TRIUMPHED AND SO WERE ABLE TO RESUME THE FOLLIES WHICH HAD SO NEARLY COST THEM THEIR LIFE.”

The days pass slowly but the years pass quickly. **The Department of Veteran Affairs reports that nearly 32,000 WWII veterans pass on every month in our country. What an inspiration each of you are to me as I look out at you and think of all that you have experienced in your lifetime and the wisdom you have to share and the power of your example. Thank you.** If you did not personally experience WWII, your parents likely did. You are each a link to that inspiring chapter in American life as well as the Korean War that followed.

16 million Americans served in uniform during WWII. Some 400,000 died in that conflict. Tom Brokaw has described the every day heroes that are sprinkled throughout communities like Draper all across America. He writes:

“They have given us the lives we have today[They are] your neighbors, the older couple who always fly the flag on the 4th of July and Veterans’ Day and spend their vacation with friends they’ve had for fifty

years at a reunion of his military outfit. They seem to have everything they need but they still count their pennies as if the bottom may drop out tomorrow. Most of all, they love each other, love life and love their country and they are not afraid to say just that.”

Here in Draper – I think of Perry Greenwood shot down over France and parachuting amidst great peril but escaping because a French family took him in and hid him from the Germans until his wounds healed and he was able to rejoin his American comrades. Led by General Patton, the American and Allied troops liberated France after Normandy.

I think too of Nelson Akagi at age 19 being denied his native born citizenship after Pearl Harbor and then forced by our military to board a train with his family and go to an internment camp in Idaho. How did he respond? With no bitterness and only devotion to his country, he walked 14 miles to enlist and then served on the front lines in Europe for more than three years. Much of that time he was a forward observer and in constant danger. His Japanese American regiment – the 442nd – was recognized at war’s end by President Truman as the most decorated of any regiment in US history.

McKay Wilkerson is among those veterans who have recently left us. We remember his more than 100 flight missions over Europe. On leave, he married

his sweetheart, Mary Lou. Like so many couples of that era, they were together for just two days and then were separated by the War for two years. He returned to Draper, eventually settled on Pioneer Road next to the Rogers and the Rhodens, raised a family and helped found the Draper Little League and Draper Bank or what is now the Draper Branch of Zion's Bank.

For nearly fifty years, Nelson Akagi and his family gave us the meticulously maintained orchards known as Akagi Farm with its distinctive "nashi" fruit (apple-pear). Perry Greenwood and his wife Pauline are with us still. The lives of these veterans and yours are a stirring reminder that freedom is a fragile thing. As President Ronald Reagan stated, it is never more than a generation away from extinction. It must be fought for and preserved by every generation that hopes to maintain what we so affectionately speak of as the "American Dream."

I have been fortunate to work closely with young students in class rooms all over our state. I ask them these questions: "What are we doing with the freedom that has been passed down to us by our forefathers?" Do we understand what it has taken for us to enjoy the lives we live today? Is ours entirely a carefree existence? What does freedom mean to you? Is it simply the absence of coercion in our lives from any source? What is it that we choose to

do with our freedom and what are we making of ourselves? Are we striving to be men and women of character, integrity and great compassion for mankind for that is the spirit that has made our country great? Are we observant, aware and in touch with the world around us? Do we see the good in all people? Do we extend mercy and kindness to those in need and do we fight against injustice?" I sincerely hope so for that is the American spirit!

Walt Disney said that as a country, our greatest natural resource is the minds of our children. As I spend time with our youth, I am in awe of their potential and all that they will yet accomplish in this blessed land of America because of the priceless freedoms that constitute our American birthright. I hope they will internalize and always carry within their hearts and minds the spirit of patriotism that is felt so strongly in this gathering today.

I have made available for you copies of a published article I wrote on the subject of Civic and Character Education in our public schools. It is based on legislation that I passed in the Utah Legislature to ensure that this heritage lives on and that our youth are taught what it truly means to be an American citizen. As President George Washington said so long ago, there is no duty more pressing on a Legislature than to support a plan for teaching the science of

government to our nation's young people who are the future guardians of the liberties of this country.

When I think of the bond that links each generation of Americans, I recall the moving account of United Airlines flight attendant, Lisa Zanetta Henn in 1984. Forty years earlier, on D-Day (June 6, 1944), her father, Peter Zanetta, was among the first wave of soldiers who landed on Omaha Beach in the greatest amphibious landing in history. Over 150,000 troops stormed the Normandy Coast at a cost of more than 10,500 dead, wounded or missing. The 2nd Ranger Battalion consisted of 225 young Army volunteers whose mission was to climb the treacherous 100 ft. Pointe Du Hoc cliff while being shot at by entrenched German soldiers. Only 99 survived. Young Peter Zanetta was among them. On that spot today, a bronze memorial statute honors, "*The Spirit of American Youth rising from the waves.*"

Lisa tells how inspired she has been throughout her life by her father's service. She said, "It always brings tears to my eyes **to think about my father as a twenty year old boy having to face that beach.**" She went on to say that the anniversary of D-Day was always very special for their family. Like all the families of those who went to war, she came to realize that her own father's survival was a miracle. "So many men died. I know that my father watched

many of his friends be killed. I know that he must have died inside a little each time. But his explanation to me was, ‘You did what you had to do and you kept on going.’”

Peter Zanetta always planned to return someday to Normandy but he died of a brain tumor in 1976. Lisa assured her father, “I’m going there someday, Dad, and I’ll see the beaches and the barricades and the monuments. I’ll see the graves and I’ll put the flowers there just like you wanted to do. I’ll see the ceremonies honoring the veterans of D Day and I’ll feel all the things you made me feel through your stories and your eyes. I’ll never forget what you went through, Dad, nor will I let anyone else forget -- and Dad, I’ll always be proud.”

Thousands of veterans reverently returned to Normandy in 1984 for the 40th anniversary of D-Day. Lisa was there just as she promised her father. President Ronald Reagan movingly paid tribute to all that occurred that historic day. This is part of what he said to the brave survivors there assembled:

[Y]ou risked everything here. Why? Why did you do it? What impelled you to put aside the instinct for self-preservation and risk your lives to take these cliffs? What inspired all the men of the armies that met here? We look at you, and somehow we know the answer. It was faith and belief; it was loyalty and love.

The men of Normandy had faith that what they were doing was right, faith that they fought for all humanity, faith that a just God would grant them mercy on this beachhead or on the next. It was the deep knowledge—and pray God we have not lost it—that there is a profound, moral difference between the use of force for liberation and

the use of force for conquest. You were here to liberate, not to conquer, and so you and those others did not doubt you cause. And you were right not to doubt.....

All of you loved liberty. All of you were willing to fight tyranny and you knew the people of your countries were behind you.

The Americans who fought here that morning knew word of the invasion was spreading through the darkness back home. They fought—or felt in their hearts, though they couldn't know in fact, that in Georgia they were filling the churches at 4 a.m., in Kansas they were kneeling on their porches and praying, and in Philadelphia they were ringing the Liberty Bell.

Something else helped the men of D-Day: their rock-hard belief that Providence would have a great hand in the events that would unfold here; that God was an ally in this great cause. And so, the night before the invasion, when Colonel Wolverton asked his parachute troops to kneel with him in prayer he told them: Do not bow your heads, but look up so you can see God and ask His blessing in what we're about to do. Also that night, General Matthew Ridgway on his cot, listening in the darkness for the promise God made to Joshua: "I will not fail thee nor forsake thee."

These are the things that impelled them; these are the things that shaped the unity of the Allies.

My wife Sue and I were fortunate and deeply moved to visit the American Cemetery in Normandy in June, 2004 (immediately after the sixty year anniversary of D-Day). As was said by President Reagan of the veterans of D-Day, we also say of each of you and your generation, **"We will always remember. We will always be proud. We will always be prepared so we may always be free."**

This priceless gift of freedom, which gives us the lives we enjoy and the close associations we celebrate today, is not new. We trace its origin in America back to the founding of our nation by ancestors who risked so much and

sacrificed to bequeath such a joyous existence to their posterity. **Carl Sandburg** warned that if America ever forgets its “hard beginnings,” we will be a nation in decline. Let us, therefore, recall the spirit of 1776 and those wondrous days for which our annual Fourth of July celebration was established.

At the critical moment when many were teetering at the overwhelming task of securing our freedom and independence as a nation, this was **the stirring call of John Adams as recounted by Daniel Webster:**

“Sink or swim, live or die, survive or perish, I give my hand and my heart to this vote. It is true, indeed, that in the beginning we aimed not at independence. But there’s a Divinity that shapes our ends...Why, then, should we defer the Declaration? . . . You and I, indeed, may rue it. We may not live to see the time when this Declaration shall be made good. We may die; die Colonists, die slaves, die, it may be, ignominiously and on the scaffold.

“Be it so. Be it so.

“If it be the pleasure of Heaven that my country shall require the poor offering of my life, the victim shall be ready. . . . But while

I do live, let me have a country, or at least the hope of a country,
and that a free country.

“But whatever may be our fate, be assured . . . that this
Declaration will stand. It may cost treasure, and it may cost blood,
but it will stand and it will richly compensate for both.

“Through the thick gloom of the present, I see the brightness
of the future as the sun in heaven. We shall make this a glorious,
and immortal day. When we are in our graves, our children will
honor it. They will celebrate it with thanksgiving, with festivity,
with bonfires, and illuminations. . . .

“Before God, I believe the hour is come. My judgment
approves this measure, and my whole heart is in it. All that I have,
and all that I am, and all that I hope, in this life, I am now ready
here to stake upon it; and I leave off as I began, that live or die,
survive or perish, I am for the Declaration. It is my living
sentiment, and by the blessing of God it shall be my dying
sentiment. Independence now, and Independence forever.”

Now, more than two hundred years later and after having survived numerous wars and threats of all type, **consider the joy of living in this free land. Columnist Dan Valentine expressed it this way:**

“America is many things...America is a brisk wind from the Atlantic Ocean...A soft breeze from the Pacific...

“America is a mountain peak in Colorado...the Mississippi River...a snow storm in Montana...the hot July sun on the wheat fields of Kansas...

“America is a small town—with one street light.

“America is a big town—with concrete canyons of skyscrapers.

“America thrives on hope. It’s a second-chance nation—where every man has the right to dream a new dream.

“America is the place where losers can become winners...where the poor can become rich...where the ignorant can become educated...where the ill can become healthy...where the lost can be found.

“America is many things: the right to attend church...the right to speak up, the right to keep quiet...the right to join the crowd, the

right to walk alone...The ghosts of giant heroes walk the halls of
America's memory: Patrick Henry...Ben
Franklin...Washington...Lincoln...and Jefferson...

“*America* is Thomas Edison...and Walt Whitman...and
Charles Lindbergh...and Babe Ruth...and Bing Crosby...and Willie
Mays.

“*America* is the Mayflower...the Boston Tea Party...Bunker
Hill...Valley Forge...Gettysburg...the Alamo...Guadalcanal,
Okinawa...Omaha Beach.

“*America* is a magic mixture of all the people of the world.
People of all races and creeds working together to build a nation.

“*America* is many things...the Statue of Liberty...Mount
Rushmore...Freeways... Yankee Stadium...Yellowstone Park.

“*America* is a traffic jam...an election day...a town meeting...
a little league baseball game...a junior prom...a Labor Day
parade...a trip to the moon...

“*America* is the right to work at a job, the right to quit a
job...the right to own property...the right to compete...the right to
follow a dream.

“*America* is a red, white, and blue tomorrow for all men and women who hold the hope of freedom in their hearts.”

American citizenship is a rare privilege and a sacred trust. It is a blessing that people in other lands can only dream of and there are many who are willing to sacrifice everything to obtain it.

Private 1st class, John Mooney once wrote to his parents from an aircraft carrier. He described how they picked up 65 Viet Nam refugees who had set out in leaky boats with their little families in hopes that someone would pick them up and take them to freedom. As the American vessel approached them, Private Mooney witnessed a scene never to be forgotten. In his words, **“They were all waiving and calling out to us, ‘Hello American sailor. Hello *freedom man*’!”**

That is truly who we are and what we are. We are the freedom men and women of the world. We are the beacon that gives light to liberty loving people everywhere. In the words of President George W. Bush, “The commitment of our fathers is the calling of our time....And we will not tire, we will not falter and we will not fail.” (I was fortunate to be able to discuss this in person with President Bush when we met during his trip to Utah in August, 2006).

Marine General Paul Kelly tells of visiting critically injured marines in a military hospital. One young marine with more tubes going in and out of his body than can be imagined could not see very well because of his condition. In General Kelly's words, "He reached up and grabbed my hand with a firm grip. He was making signals and we realized he wanted to tell me something. We put a pad of paper in his hand—and he wrote 'Semper Fi.'" What do those words mean? What was the injured marine trying to say as he lay close to death? They are the legendary battle cry of the Marine Corps, **"Semper Fidelis"**—**meaning "always faithful."** **Let that be the creed of every American, young or old.**

And finally, my hope for all of us as we contemplate the challenges that yet await us and which freedom must always face is that we and our posterity will fulfill those duties as capably and nobly as you have done. I pray that we will never fail to live up to our national motto, "In God We Trust". That hope is expressed in a poem titled *VICTORY*. It was carried in the uniform pocket of a brave soldier:

Ye that have faith to look with fearless eyes

Beyond the tragedy of a world at strife,

And know that out of death and night shall rise

The dawn of ampler life:

Rejoice, whatever anguish rend the heart,

That God has given you the priceless dower

To live in these great times and have your part

In Freedom's crowning hour,

That ye may tell your sons who see the light

High in the heavens—their heritage to take—

“I saw the powers of darkness take their flight;

I saw the morning break.”

**THANK YOU. I AM HONORED TO HAVE JOINED WITH YOU
TODAY IN THIS GRAND REUNION AND CELEBRATION.**

**LaVar Christensen
Draper, Utah**