

## **The New American Constellation**

Speech for Gig Harbor, WA Flag Day Celebration, 13 JUN 2014

Gig Harbor Rotary Club

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Many of you may be wondering who this Soldier is standing in front of you today and why he was chosen to be here. Certainly I have no name recognition; I've never been in the news. I am not one of the only three living Medal of Honor recipients currently serving and stationed at Joint Base Lewis-McChord. It is only natural to wonder. It is even possible I met some of you when your community leaders visited Fort Lewis a few months ago for a barbecue and meet-and greet with my Company Commander CPT Lushenko and my Command – but I do not think that is the reason. In fact, I am not even a native Washingtonian – I was born in a small town in New York dotted with apple orchards and horse farms. From the outset, I appear completely unremarkable. I would like to think this is exactly why my Command saw fit to recommend me to speak with you today. I do not consider myself special or unique in any way, I'm just like you. My life is your life, my successes and failures are no different than your own – and I am proud of that plain-ness – imbued with an ordinary American spirit inside all of us.

My greatest virtue may be the commonality I share with all of you: the American Flag, and the understanding that I am not unique.

I am here today to talk about an aspect of this commonality, albeit a defining one. We all derive a sense of purpose and drive from this sacred cloth each and every day, even if we do not stop, take pause, and remind ourselves of its presence in our lives. Many of us pass it each day, fly it proudly at our homes or place of work, but only feel its hold on our collective consciousness as we see it raised on national holidays or at sporting events. Those of us lucky enough to serve our Country in uniform are privileged to

salute the Flag every day and are grateful to do so. It is a constant reminder of the greatness our Country fosters in all of us.

Certainly I am not the first speaker you have heard talk about the meaning of the American Flag. In keeping with tradition, you are probably expecting a long, flowery description of its birth, a battle history reminiscent of literary treatments such as The Killer Angels or The Red Badge of Courage, and biographies of the men and women forever married to its story. To save myself from being compared to a public service announcement, I will save that for the end, because that is what I want you to remember.

As you know, any number of university studies show people more readily remember the first and last things they hear, the middle is often lost with time. After you leave here today, I don't want you to remember my experiences or my faith in the Flag, but remember the long life it has had and its impact on your *own* lives.

Although I stand before you wearing the uniform of an American Soldier, twenty years ago I started my military career in the Marine Corps – I enlisted December 4<sup>th</sup> 1994 out of Baltimore, MD. Not unlike the Army, the Marine Corps is rich in history and the Corps prides itself on its can-do spirit and team mindset. This wasn't new to me at the time. As a child growing up in the 1970s, I was all too aware of the problems facing our Nation. By kindergarten I knew all about economic recession, social strife, racial inequality, Vietnam and the Soviet march toward world domination. From an early age, children today are equally aware of the same dangers we face from similar threats just from different faces. I didn't grow up in a family of privilege surrounded by tutors and home libraries – my Mother was a New York public school teacher and my father was an engineer – and they engaged their children the same way you do yours, usually around a hurried weeknight dinner or family pizza night. My Parents aren't baby boomers, they were born at the onset of WWII and my grandparents, who played an important role in

my life, were old enough to leave home to find work with the rest of the Country during the Great Depression. I'm sure if you believe everything you see on TV you'd believe everyone in the Country was enjoying free love, long hair and acoustic guitar in the 1960s, but we know that isn't true, most Americans were working hard to feed their families and cope with the tragedies wrought from Vietnam.

I shared in the same collective American experience as the rest of the Country, with parents that did their best to teach that actions have consequences and as an adult I wouldn't just be expected to stand up for myself, but my Family and those who couldn't stand up for themselves. My Parents' strong religious convictions taught me purpose in this world is achieved through your actions, not just your words, and the greatest service you can provide to your fellow man is, in fact, *service* - by providing a voice and strength to those who cannot.

The Marine Corps reinforced in me the importance of civic responsibility and sacrifice - to put yourself between your fellow countrymen and the dangers we face - to stand in their stead so that the Nation survives. It taught me a different history than I previously knew – about men like Smedley Butler, Dan Daly, Evans Carlson, A.A. Vendegrift, Chesty Puller and Carlos Hathcock – men who came before me and started in the Corps in the exact same spot I was then - all of us - Marines. The history of the Army is more widely taught – its leaders are often more public. As a Soldier, I share the uniform and devotion to duty with men like George Washington, Francis Marion, Robert Rogers, Andrew Jackson, Joshua Chamberlain, Alvin York, Douglas MacArthur, Audie Murphy – you can see how this list can continue. Today's military is unashamed to promote purely American virtues which extol initiative, selfless service, and being part of something greater than ourselves.

This doesn't just mean being a member of a fire team, or platoon, or battalion, but a proud member of our Country, honored to contribute to its future. I am reminded it is a

privilege to serve and my duty to contribute. Passivity is not a virtue, especially for those who thrive under a blanket of freedom and emboldened in a society represented by the American Flag.

Serving our Country has given me an opportunity I would not otherwise have had. I have travelled to forty-nine of our fifty States and experienced cultures from all over the world. I've met Brits, Germans, Dutch, Ukrainians, Canadians, Australians, Kiwis, Afghans, Iraqis, Lebanese, Egyptians, Sudanese, Norwegians, and the list goes on. All have enriched my life and shaped the gratitude I have for being an American. But there are others I encountered that will forever cement my need to defend this Flag and my Countrymen. The Serbs during the Yugoslavian Revolution and The Taliban come to mind. However, I consider myself lucky for seeing, first hand, the world as it "is" and not as we hope it to be.

After leaving the Marine Corps, I was fortunate to be accepted to Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore to complete my Bachelor's and attend Grad School. I majored in political science and I took a couple of classes taught by a well-known professor and author whose pedigree included a close relationship with the Family of philosopher Friedrich Hayek and an expert knowledge in, as he would put it – liberalism proper and proper liberalism.

This man was just one of many Europeans the US brought over after WWII – men like Wernher Von Braun who were undeniably instrumental in the first moon landing, but also developed the V2 rocket for the Third Reich. In January of 2000, this professor sponsored me for an internship with the Rockville Public Defenders Office. At its conclusion, I paid him a visit to let him know the internship went well and I had an offer of employment if I chose to work part time while in school and we got to *talking*. *Herr Professor* never sponsored students for anything but he took a liking to me in class – maybe it was because I was older or he appreciated my Marine Corps inspired

punctuality. On that cold night in February, I came face-to-face with what I thought I had left behind in the Marines, with what I thought only existed outside my beloved Country. Maybe it was his advanced age or his loneliness, but I sat and talked that night with a man reminiscing about his time as a Wehrmacht Nazi Officer who ran a POW camp in Germany during the war and the mistaken belief that we shared a common military discipline and ethic.

Obviously in the days that followed I did everything anyone here would do and found that the school already knew of his past and that the US Government had given him a pardon to pursue his research in America after the war. But I did learn one thing from all this and it is the most poignant advice I can ever give a fellow American.

If you ever wonder if voting or participating in Government matters, please sit down and have a conversation with a Nazi or some other hate monger; our freedoms guarantee that there are probably some wandering around somewhere. Do this then try; I dare you, try and not vote. Try not to stand a little taller with your shoulders a little straighter, the next time you see our Flag flying above you.

At the same time this was happening I also took classes with one of those professors who will always make you look back at your school years and smile. As a veteran, I was a bit of a rarity at a school like Hopkins, this was before 9/11 and the modern GI Bill which made it possible for service members to pay for expensive educations. At a school with less than 4000 undergrads I may have been the only veteran at the time. I met Dr. Carolyn Eastman in a history class and I think she was just as interested in asking me what it was like to serve in uniform as I was in her research on the early American Republic. I am using her full name here because a few years ago she published her first book on the significance of early American speech makers and I hope you google it. One day, Dr. Eastman asked me what, if any, profound affect the Marine Corps had on me, this being part of a larger debate over whether the Marine Corps actually makes

Marines or simply recruits, trains and retains like-minded people. I told her that the military had made me, and forgive the term, a *humanist*. The world hadn't jaded me. Seeing the strife, injustice and cruelty the world offered most of its people didn't sour me or make me see life as hopeless.

It made me proud of who we are, grateful for what we have in America, and inspired by the indomitable spirit we find inside each of us when faced with insurmountable odds. I was lucky enough to be part of an organization that defended a Country that gave so much to its people.

I told Dr. Eastman, when I walk down the street in Baltimore, which if you know Baltimore can be pretty rough, I know I will never hear the sounds and see the sights the rest of the world does – no whistle and thud of incoming rockets and mortars, no masked men driving through the city with automatic weapons on the backs of pickup trucks and I knew, or at the time I thought I knew – this only being a year after Columbine, that American mothers would never know the same fear Israeli mothers faced each day as they put their children on a bus to school, worried whether that bus would blow up in the street or their children would not otherwise come home that day. I told Dr. Eastman that as a Marine, when we entered a village on patrol Mothers, Fathers, Sisters, Brothers - would all come out to see us and many said something I will take to the grave – “Nothing bad will happen to me today because the Marines are here.” More recently I heard this same gratitude expressed by an Afghan man about my same age living on the eastern border with Pakistan. At the time, Khost was so dangerous and the threat of insurgent attacks so prevalent the local Afghans refused to take American currency in the bazaars for fear of Taliban reprisals.

One day in the bazaar, this shop keeper asked me to join him in the back of his shop so he and his family could share their lunch with me, a kindness which never stopped impressing me. In perfect English this man said something many veterans wished their

own countrymen would say, "Thank you, sir, for taking a year out of your life and away from your family to help my country and my Family, I know how hard it is to be away from the ones you love." The places, language and even our uniforms may change but around the world one thing will always be the same - what the American Flag stands for when someone wearing it says they are here to help. This unwavering belief in my fellow Countrymen, my Country and my Flag is the change I told Dr. Eastman would never leave me and it's what I am most proud to take away from my time in the Corps.

Many people wonder when they look back on their lives if they had what it takes to serve in uniform and they see us as somehow different. We are not. In a letter to Lance Corporal Joe Hickey one month prior to the Marine Corps Barracks Bombing in Beirut in 1983, President Ronald Reagan wrote, "Some people work an entire lifetime and wonder if they ever made a difference to the world. But the Marines don't have that problem." However, those of us in uniform come from the same place we all started. We are your Sons, your Daughters, Wives and Husbands. True, less than a quarter of 1% of the Nation serves, but I have a simple test if you ever ask yourself that question. The Marines simply awakened something in me that existed long before I arrived at Parris Island and it is inside all Americans.

I came to believe as sure I did in any article of religious faith or individual trust that I was part of a brotherhood. From that point forward until the day I die, every Marine is my brother or sister. With that I also knew my purpose – Marines go to war and they don't all come home. Marines are prepared to die – it's what they do – but the Marine Corps will live forever, which means I will live forever. That spirit awakened in me at Parris Island exists in each of you. You feel it tug at your heart when you hear the National Anthem and see the Flag raised. You know as Americans we all share equally in the greatness that is our Nation and the hard work and sacrifice it takes to keep our Flag raised. As long as there is an America, we will all live forever in its history.

Less than a year after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, on June 14<sup>th</sup> 1777, the Second Continental Congress passed the Flag Resolution Act. *Resolved*: that the Flag of the thirteen United States be thirteen stripes, alternate red and white, that the union be thirteen stars, white in a blue field, representing a new constellation. *A New Constellation*, I could not think of a better way to describe our Flag. We all know what a constellation is, it's what you see in the night's sky and it not only paints a picture, but tells an ancient story that not only ties you to human history, but you know that wherever you are on earth, other people, whom you have never met, can also look up and see what you see and know the same story.

The modern Flag design was adopted 237 years ago with thirteen stars and thirteen stripes. Since then we have added stars, and for a while stripes, for additional states. The Flag has gone through twenty-six revisions, and the present Flag was adopted July 4<sup>th</sup> 1960 after Hawaii entered the Union. Of all the revisions our Flag has had, arguably the most famous Flag in our history is the Flag known as The Star Spangled Banner. This is the Flag which flew over Fort McHenry where America made its final stand against the British after they invaded and burned our Nation's Capital during the War of 1812. This Flag inspired Francis Scott Key's 1814 poem "Defence of Fort McHenry" and actually had fifteen stars and fifteen stripes. In 1818, however, it became apparent that as the Country expanded the Flag could not expand by adding both stars and stripes. It was at this point Congress reduced the number of stripes to thirteen to represent the original thirteen colonies. The Flag changes – it evolves – just like the American experience. It is a snapshot of where we are now and reminds us of where we've been.

We all grow up learning about the early Flag makers – Betsy Ross, Rebecca Young; in fact, there is a fifteenth century window in Selby Abbey in North Yorkshire, England – which shows George Washington's Family historic Coat of Arms – a shield denoting stars and alternating red and white stripes. The 1777 Flag design we see today is credited to Francis Hopkinson, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and member of



Congress. Hopkinson even had the audacity to request payment in the form of a quarter cask of wine for his design.

Congress returned his invoice, stating that he was already salaried as a member of Congress and the design could not be solely attributed to one designer considering the collective efforts involved. How incredible it is to see the spirit of our collective effort actualized so early in our history! How inspired!

If you watch the news, read the newspapers or internet, listen to talk radio – the list of outlets which oversaturate the airways with problems, issues, quagmires and political stalemates continues ad infinitum. It is easy to become disheartened while instead we should strive toward that “collective effort” – the noble spirit represented in our Flag. I submit to you that this spirit is not gone, in our lifetimes it has always been here. It is in you, in me, in our Families, and in the people with which you and I are both proud to work. When I look at our Flag I don’t just see the history and pride – I see the everyman – like Bob Heft. Mr. Heft wasn’t a famous general or war hero or statesman. He didn’t march on Selma with Dr. King or lead anti-apartheid rallies on college campuses in the 1980s. In 1958 Bob was a seventeen year old high school student in Ohio living in Eisenhower’s America. Bob designed the Flag we fly today. Originally he designed it as part of a high school class project. Do you know what his grade was? B minus. But Bob stuck to his guns on this and after careful negotiations with his teacher Bob submitted the design to his Congressman in anticipation of Alaska and Hawaii entering the Union.

If Congress adopted seventeen year old Bob’s design, the teacher would reconsider the B minus. We look at the Flag today and can’t help but think, “Of course that’s how it should look, how else could it look?” Out of more than fifteen hundred submissions only a handful resembled what we see today. After high school, and a reconsidered “A” on his design, Bob became a teacher, a college professor and even the Mayor of Napoleon, Ohio. Bob never stopped espousing the virtues of his Country and the Flag,

which although he designed it, belonged to all of us. It wasn't Bob's Flag – it was our Flag. Bob passed away in 2009, but not after travelling more than 100,000 miles each year, leaving his home in a town of less than 10,000 people, to talk to his fellow Americans about the spirit represented by this Flag which exists in all of us.

In closing, I hope you leave here not just remembering that you heard a Soldier speak here today, but that we all took a collective moment to reflect on the power and history we all share as Americans and the pride we feel when say this is *our* Flag. 237 years ago, the people of our nation not only hoisted this brand new symbol of America in the air, but they created a *new constellation* for the world. Not a constellation that tells a story in the night's sky, but one told in the front yards of countless homes across our Country and on the shoulders and uniforms of its military men and women as we stand in the stead of those who cannot stand for themselves and give voice to the voiceless throughout the world.