

**Veterans Day Speech at Veterans Day Ceremony at Dallas City Hall on November 11, 2008**  
**By Tom Pauken**

We are here today to honor our American veterans – living and dead – who have sacrificed so much to protect our freedom. I particularly am reminded of the more than 57,000 of my fellow soldiers in Vietnam who gave their lives in defense of those freedoms.

Let me take you back 27 years – to 1981 – six years after the fall of Saigon to Communist North Vietnam. We had just been through the late 1970s – which President Jimmy Carter referred to as to a “post-Vietnam malaise.” Vietnam Veterans were depicted in the media as everything from guilt-ridden victims to drug-crazed psychos. Unfortunately, because of our intra-generational split over the war, there had been a tendency of many members of my own generation to blame the warrior for the war. Literally, many of our returning soldiers would not even put on their resumes that they had served in the military in Vietnam for fear that it would cost them the opportunity to get a job in the civilian sector.

A group of Vietnam Veterans gathered on the White House lawn in November 1981 as President Ronald Reagan announced the establishment of the Vietnam Veterans Leadership Program – an initiative run by Vietnam Veterans to help our fellow veterans of the war who were unemployed, underemployed or who had lingering problems associated with their Vietnam experience.

There was quite an array of Vietnam Veterans of all backgrounds, branches of service, and races who came together and volunteered to bring their fellow veterans home the right way.

Then Congressmen John McCain, Tom Ridge, Al Gore all lent a hand. Chuck Hagel and Jim Webb – both of who are now in the U.S. Senate – helped us. The guys who went on to found Corrections Corporation of America got involved in Tennessee—Fred Smith of Federal Express also supported the Tennessee initiative. Rich Kolb was one of our leaders in the Houston program and now is the Editor of VFW. John Fales, who later became President of the Blinded American Veterans Foundation was our Communications Director, and Rick Eilert -- author of a marvelous book, For Self and Country helped run our program in Chicago. Also, John Garcia directed our program in New Mexico. Today, John serves as Governor Richardson’s Veterans adviser. The list goes on and on.

Flash forward to four years later; and by then, the country had begun to recognize the value of the experience of those young soldiers who served in Vietnam and who later went on to make major contributions to the public and private sectors in American society. Our theme was: What does America do with experience like this? Put it to work. And, America responded in a positive way – and, before long, Vietnam Veterans were proudly putting their military service in Vietnam back on their resumes.

Just like young men and women answered our country’s call in those difficult times, so too have young Americans volunteered to serve our country in the post-9/11 conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The good news is – this time around – whatever one’s views are on the war in Iraq, the American people are not blaming the warrior for the war. The bad news in many of those soldiers have experienced multiple and extended tours of duty in the war zone. All who have served in Iraq and/or Afghanistan are volunteers. More than 40% are from the National Guard or Enlisted Reserve who often are pulled away from their civilian jobs or from the small businesses they run for their tours in the war zone.

We Americans appreciate their service, give them welcome home parades this time around, and then tend to go about our business – forgetting how hard that transition from the military to civilian life can be for those who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan – and not taking into account the value of that experience to potential civilian employers.

What I also think we don’t realize – unless one has been through the experience of a Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, or Afghanistan, is the “reverse cultural shock” these young veterans face once they come home. They prepare you for the cultural shock of going off to Iraq or Afghanistan, but not for being dropped back into a civilian society which seems so disconnected from what the young soldier has just been through.

That’s why veterans helping veterans worked so well back when we put in place the Vietnam Veterans Leadership Program back in the 1980s and why it is already starting to work with our Texas Veterans Leadership Program – where those who served in Iraq or Afghanistan are helping their fellow veterans make a successful transition to civilian life – and the best thing we can do for those veterans is to get them back to work, in job training programs, or in school as quickly as possible so that they can begin to catch up with their peer group who have advanced in their classes while these young soldiers have been serving overseas in a war zone.

Let me give you some statistics on what is happening with these returning veterans. According to a RAND research study, in 2006 alone 175,000 active duty military personnel and 100,000 reservists entered the civilian work force – many after serving in Iraq or Afghanistan.

They often face considerable obstacles in the labor market which many are entering for the first time. Indeed, the unemployment rate for young veterans consistently has exceeded the rate for young nonveterans. In the last few years, that has ranged from two to three times the rate for nonveterans in general.

Worse, the Wall Street Journal reported earlier this year about a VA study which found that many returning veterans have simply dropped entirely out of the work force. The percentage of veterans not in the labor force increased from 10% in 2000 to 23% in 2005, and young veterans who do find employment often end up in low-paying jobs, with half earning less than \$25,000 a year.

We are moving aggressively here in Texas to get those returning veterans back on track for success in civilian life as quickly as possible.

That is why Governor Perry and I have established the Texas Veterans Leadership Program run by returning veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan to help their fellow veterans find employment

and get the help that they need in making a successful transition to civilian life. TVLP is headed by a Dallasite, Jason Doran, a retired Marine Gunnery Sergeant who was awarded the Silver Star for bravery in Iraq.

We will have 28 returning veterans at local workforce locations all across the state helping to put the experience of those who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan. We need to translate the military experience of those veterans into marketable skills for good jobs in the civilian sector. Even though the official launch of the program by Gov. Perry was only yesterday, already over 600 returning veterans have been helped by TVLP. This concept of veteran helping veteran worked before and will work again – only this time with Iraqi and Afghan veterans helping their fellow veterans make that successful transition to civilian life.

Texas needs to be the model for the nation in welcoming our returning veterans back from Iraq and Afghanistan the right way – by putting that experience back to work. These young men and women have answered our country's call under very difficult circumstances. Now, it is up to us to make it possible for them to use their talents in the civilian world to make this a better state and a better nation. These are difficult times for our nation with a troubled economy and a difficult challenge facing us from the forces of radical Islam. Just like so many veterans of previous wars went on to be leaders of our nation, we need this next generation of leaders who have served in Iraq or Afghanistan to help get our country back on the right track.