

During WashU Veterans Day keynote address, Duckworth underscores importance of continued service

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ST. LOUIS, MO — Combat Veteran and U.S. Senator Tammy Duckworth (D-IL) underscored the value of continued service to our country—in and out of uniform—during a keynote address at Washington University’s Veterans Day ceremony tonight. Duckworth is an Iraq War Veteran, Purple Heart recipient and former Assistant Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs who served in the Reserve Forces for 23 years. Since she was recovering from her combat wounds at Walter Reed, Duckworth has made her mission serving and protecting Veterans and servicemembers. A photo of



her speaking tonight is available [here](#).

“This is a day to celebrate every brave man and woman who puts everything on the line to protect our democracy – the greatest democracy in the world,” Duckworth said. “I would not be here today if it were not for my buddies who saved me, and not a day goes

by that I don't think about their courage and sacrifice. I can't and won't waste this second chance they gave me. While none of us can ever fully repay the debt we owe to those who protect us in uniform, we all can and should recommit ourselves to keeping the promises we've made to our troops, our Veterans and their families."

Duckworth was among the first Army women to fly combat missions during Operation Iraqi Freedom when, in 2004, her Black Hawk helicopter was hit by an RPG and she lost her legs and the partial use of her right arm. As a Congresswoman, she coauthored the bipartisan *Clay Hunt SAV (Suicide Prevention for American Veterans) Act*, which passed both the House and Senate unanimously and was signed into law to improve mental health care services for Veterans and reduce Veteran suicide. She also introduced the bipartisan *Troop Talent Act*—large portions of which are now law—to help servicemembers transition to civilian life by making it easier for them to turn the skills they learned in the military into the credentials and licenses needed for jobs in similar civilian fields.

As a Senator, she is continuing her work to ensure those who serve in uniform receive the support they deserve during and after their service. In August, Duckworth introduced several bills intended to protect and support Veterans and servicemembers—men and women who have proven they are willing lay down their lives defending America—from being deported or denied healthcare. Duckworth's proposals, two of which are cosponsored by U.S. Senator Catherine Cortez Masto (D-NV), would prohibit the Administration from deporting Veterans, give legal permanent residents a path to citizenship through military service, establish naturalization offices at military training facilities, and bolster VA healthcare services for Veterans.

Duckworth's full remarks as prepared for delivery follow:

Hello everyone. Thank you for that introduction and for inviting me to join you here today at Wash U. I want to honor the servicemembers and Veterans here with us today. Please stand, if you are able, and be recognized.

You may have come from different branches and different backgrounds, but you all hold the same sense of duty – the same commitment to our nation. It is my privilege to be with you here today to honor and celebrate you and that commitment.

I say *celebrate* to highlight that Veteran's Day is different from Memorial Day.

On Memorial Day, we honor the lives of those lost. Veterans Day is a day of celebration and joy, honoring those who have served. It's a day to celebrate you, your families and every brave man and woman who puts everything on the line to protect our democracy – the greatest democracy in the world.

I've witnessed the courage and sacrifice of our American heroes firsthand. In fact, I'm alive because of it.

I'm here today because, thirteen years ago, nearly to the day, my buddies refused to leave me behind when my helicopter was shot down over Iraq. I would not be here today if it were not for my buddies who saved me... and not a day goes by that I don't think about their courage – their sacrifice.

November 12, 2004, is my "Alive Day."

It was the day I almost died, but didn't. And it became the first day of my second chance at life.

I was flying high that day over Iraq in my Black Hawk with the best crew out there. Then, without warning, an RPG tore through the cockpit of my helicopter. It was a lucky shot for the enemy. One of my legs was vaporized and the other amputated by my aircraft's instrument panel.

The explosion blew off the entire back of my right arm. I was quite literally in pieces.

My pilot-in-command managed to land our aircraft, and they started pulling out the wounded. They thought I was dead at first, but when they tried to give medical attention to one my crew members, Chris, he refused help and told them to help me instead. He saw that I was still bleeding, which meant that my heart was still beating. He did what every servicemember in combat is willing to do, even if they hope they never have to: he refused treatment for himself to save someone else.

My buddies wouldn't give up on me. They refused to leave me behind. It was a hard day for me – and a hard day for my crew. They picked me up – covered in my blood and tissue – as they tried to keep my body intact. If I didn't make it, they knew they could at least return what was left of me to my family. It was a good day for me because good men saved me and I lived...

I survived to serve my nation again.

After I woke up in Walter Reed, I made it my life's mission to honor my buddies who saved me that day by working every day to serve our nation's troops and Veterans. Just like many of you in the audience, I knew my opportunity to serve wasn't over. I wasn't ready to stop.

I no longer had the same ability to fly a Black Hawk, but my personal commitment to protect the nation I loved was as strong as ever. I was then privileged to serve our nation'

s Veterans at the VA, and continued that service as a Member of Congress and now as a United States Senator.

My story is not that different from any other Veteran here today. For centuries, our men and women in uniform have put their lives on the line to serve our country – willing to pay any price to protect our freedom.

Many of these Veterans choose to continue serving their nation after they leave active service.

The mission is always the same, but the path of service just looks a little different. After many of our Veterans came home in the years following 9/11, we saw them continue to serve in our police stations, courtrooms, schools and hospitals with the help of the *Post-9/11 GI Bill*

The work many of you are doing – whether you’re here to pursue a degree in social work, law or business – is still part of your path to serving your fellow Americans, and I am deeply grateful for your service.

Just as picking up a rifle to defend our country is ‘American Service,’ so is furthering your education to help support our justice system, workforce or schools. The strength of our nation depends on your work here.

Don’t get me wrong – serving in our military is one of the most honorable acts for any American, and our nation’s safety depends on that service – but our country’s strength is more than just the might of its military.

Our strength lies in all the ways Americans come together to protect our shared values of freedom, equality and justice – whether those efforts are on the battlefield, in the classroom or on the steps of our nation’s Capital.

Our freedom depends on your work during and after your time in uniformed services.

As Ronald Reagan once said, there is “no arsenal, no weapon in the arsenals of the world, so formidable as the will and moral courage of free men and women.”

So today – and every day of the year – it’s important that we honor all that our nation’s heroes have done for our country. In a practical sense, that means helping our Veterans find good-paying jobs when they return home, it means making sure they can afford higher education and quality housing, it means providing them with access to high quality health care.

It's also important to consider all of the brave men and women who serve in our military who are not yet citizens. Just yesterday, I stood with Senator Durbin and a Dreamer serving in the military to call on Congress to protect our immigrant servicemembers from deportation.

I also recently introduced several bills to protect and support Veterans and servicemembers from being deported or denied healthcare. Men and women willing to wear our uniform shouldn't be deported by the same nation they risked their lives to defend.

I've also introduced legislation with bipartisan support to make sure Veterans don't have to pay for preventive health services and medications out of pocket. Bottom line, we need a national strategy that is focused on helping Veterans transition from military to civilian life that makes sure every Veteran gets the care and support they've earned.

I live every day to honor my buddies who saved me that day by continuing to serve my nation. I can't and won't waste this second chance they gave me. To each of them, to all of my fellow Veterans, and to all of their families, thank you from the bottom of my heart. You are true heroes.

God bless you, God bless our troops in harm's way and God bless the United States of America.