

Remarks

Honorable Anthony J. Principi  
Secretary of Veterans Affairs

The American Veterans Heritage Center  
Dinner Speech  
Dayton, Ohio

April 10, 2003

Good evening. It's wonderful to see so many long-time friends, again.

On behalf of American's veterans, and all Americans, present and future, it gives me great pleasure this evening to personally thank the members of the Dayton Development Coalition ... The American Veterans Heritage Center ... the Dayton Chamber of Commerce ... Ohio's veterans service organizations ... and individual Daytonians for your recognition that the Gem City's past is important to America's future...and for acting on that knowledge.

Yours is not an easy task. The stewardship of history today is much more than restoring and refurbishing historic structures.

Preservation today saves special places in terms of the quality of life they support. It is more than bricks and mortar...columns and cobblestones.

It is the way communities, like Dayton, come together in revitalized, dynamic neighborhoods and districts that are rooted firmly in an appreciation of history ... but also growing and thriving with an optimism in the times ahead.

And so, on behalf of America's 25 million veterans, thank you for embracing irreplaceable chapters of America's story. For focusing attention on the importance of veterans in the construct of our National heritage. For shepherding the tangible legacy of Dayton's glorious past ... to a sound and prosperous present ... with the promise of a rich and promising future.

Your work will rescue enduring symbols of our cultural tradition ... icons that define us as a Nation. Fostering pride in our historic legacy, and educating our citizens.

Your work illuminates the urgency and importance of ensuring that our at-risk buildings and endangered places do not, through neglect and indifference, decay to forgotten dust, but rather stand proudly as beacons ... lighting our thoughts of our future by highlighting the paths of our past.

Through your individual and collective generosity of spirit, in Dayton, those guardians of our memories will long continue to mark the important passages in America's life.

The veterans who, decade after decade, worshipped beneath its frescoed ceilings and walls ... prayed in its red-cushioned pews ... and viewed, with pride, the National Colors draped majestically across its walnut and ash eaves were themselves shaped by the times in which they lived.

These were Americans who fought valiantly to rid the Nation of the scourge of slavery ... who tamed

the vast Western frontier ... who, in the Spanish American War, established the United States as a world power ... and who later fought the global war to end all wars.

They molded and shaped ... and fired and forged our great Nation. In the finely crafted buildings they once called home, their voices cross generational divides to whisper of timeless American virtues-- honor and integrity ... pride and perseverance ... courage and commitment.

Yes, this Dayton campus -- among our riches in historic significance -- has bequeathed to us a might legacy worth preserving.

As it protects a priceless piece of veterans' history ... Dayton's history ... America's history, the American Veterans Heritage Center will safeguard for America's future generations the legacy of honor written by generations of uniformed men and women whose past military services safeguarded our present.

People throughout the world point to many reasons for our Nation's greatness. First among them, of course, is our founding axiom that all men and women are created free and equal.

Others cite our government institutions ... abundant natural resources ... economic might ... or military strength.

Although all of these things make America a country to be envied and copied, they are more the result than the cause of our greatness.

As I look out across this imposing campus and the noble history it holds, I am convinced that it is here that we find a wellspring of our Nation's greatness ... a wellspring flowing into our National spirit and infusing so many Americans with the will to give what President Abraham Lincoln called the last full measure of devotion.

America has been blessed with such men and women as no other country in the history of the world. Their service and strength of purpose, across wars and generations, humble and inspire us.

Because they bequeathed to us -- and generations to come -- the enduring legacy of Freedom that allows us to flourish as individuals, as a society, and as a Nation -- the oldest constitutional democracy on earth.

A new generation has now been called to defend Liberty for our citizens, and indeed, for freedom-loving citizens the world over.

Teddy Roosevelt, president during the heyday of the Dayton Veterans Home, and consummate conservationist and passionate advocate for preserving the icons of our American heritage, once said: "We are not building this country of ours for a day; it has to last through the ages."

In the century since gone by, many of the once vibrant chapters of our National narrative have become victims of collapsing walls, sagging roofs, and eroding mortar.

All of you assembled here this evening have graciously taken up President Roosevelt's call -- only in this case -- to restore and rebuild 'to last through the ages.'

VA, too, has a deep obligation to be a responsible curator of our legacy of buildings and grounds constructed to serve the veterans of the past and now standing eloquent but silent watch over the memories of generations who have gone before.

My Department has been entrusted by history with an extraordinary collection of historic buildings and sites telling an important story about veterans and their contribution to America.

It is long past time to preserve the remaining remnants of our past ... and wherever possible, to seek out opportunities for its adaptive reuse as part of our broader mission of serving veterans.

VA has 4,800 buildings totaling 140 million square feet on over 15,500 acres of property.

The average age of the structures and grounds where we bring our mission of healing and service to life is more than 50 years. And approximately 30% of them are on -- or eligible for -- the National Historic Register.

It is clear to me that unless we move quickly, much of this irreplaceable legacy may be lost forever.

Your work in the interest of preservation and restoration may well stand as a working model for historic preservation across VA's broad landscape of venerable buildings and grounds.

Because preservation in America has always been grounded in productive partnerships between the public and private sectors for VA, the Dayton campus is among our richest in historic significance. Its legacy is worth preserving.

It -- indeed all of the West Dayton historic area -- is the memory of America. Its buildings and artifacts are the tangible stuff of our history.

They are part of the crucible in which much of our National character was formed. And they embody the legacy of Americans of every culture and ethnic origin. To turn our backs on them is to deny and reject our own history as a people ... as Americans.

The cost of such shortsightedness, too, could never be paid in dollars because it would be a debit against the ever-optimistic, ever-buoyant American spirit.