

American History: Our Hope for the Future
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The sun stood atop the horizon, skipping pebbles of light across the water. My grandfather and I sat across from each other at a table on the deck overlooking the ocean. He was, as always, in his wheelchair. My chair was wet from the earlier rain, but I didn't mind, because we were already too deep into our conversation.

I told him, "I didn't even know you were a veteran. Why didn't you tell me?" I felt incredibly confused. He'd always blamed the wheelchair on a childhood illness. He paused to look out at the sunset, and I did the same. I remember feeling so afraid that I had said something wrong.

We spent a lot of time looking out at the water that evening, and the sun never seemed to go any further behind the edge of the world--but maybe that's just my imagination. After a while, he answered, "Because I didn't want my grandson to think any less of me."

I was confused. Why would I think less of him? I'd heard many tales about the awful things soldiers experience, and judging by his silence over these years, he hadn't had the most pleasurable time either, but that's nothing by which to judge someone.

Another pause. Shortly, he explained it to me: "We didn't win. They called us losers. They spat on us."

"No," I said. "I understand what it means for somebody to lay his life on the line for his country. In fact, I respect you even more."

A third pause. This one was the longest, and I could feel the tension easing as we both looked over the edge at the open ocean. At last, I couldn't stand it anymore. I finally asked the question that had been burning in my mind since the beginning of our conversation: "Would you do it again?"

My grandfather looked at me deeply, and without hesitation said, "Yes."

It occurred to me at that moment by the ocean that our history is written by silent soldiers like my grandfather. From the foggy fields of Concord and "the shot heard round the world"--to the rooftops of Fallujah and the mile-long strikes of American snipers--the true authors of our history are nameless patriots:

a farmer setting aside his plow to pick up a musket,
a nurse putting motherhood on hold to answer the call of duty,
a pastor praying for the souls of his congregation at home while giving hope to his platoon overseas.

In my grandfather's eyes I see that hope, a hope for America's future. And at the same time, I sense a need for appreciation in the hearts of veterans like him—a need so deep that he felt ashamed for so long to share with me his most cherished honor. It's disheartening that so many Americans refuse to acknowledge that need.

I would not take away any American's freedom. Although I recite it with every fiber, I cannot command my peers to face "Old Glory" and stand for "The Pledge". Nor can I legislate that an athlete stand for "The Star-Spangled Banner" or that a teenager put down his hot dog and soda so he can put his hand over his heart. So little do some Americans know about the real game-changers in our history. We lionize the ones who

score touchdowns on Sunday while we marginalize the ones who touched-down on Normandy.

How can we discredit the sacrifices of our veterans?

How can we torment a wheelchair-bound hero like my grandfather, with both insults and with neglect?

Jesus Christ once explained such behavior: "Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do."

Sadly, those who ignore our banner and our anthem are ignorant of what they stand for. Sure, placing our hands over our hearts is a symbol of patriotism, but the flag's symbolism is steeped in history—the history of our veterans. From Bunker Hill to San Juan Hill to Hamburger Hill, veterans have defended our rights and our opportunities to accomplish our dreams. Our only hope for a future is to acknowledge *what*--and more importantly, *who*--made America possible.

As we engage in battles of historical consequence, it's easy to forget that our greatest war is against ignorance.

This is a fight that's on our soil.

It starts at home.

It strengthens in our churches.

It's our duty to carry it into our schools and our workplaces.

And it's a war that we must win.

I plan to fight it by raising my voice—by adopting, as I am now, the voice of democracy. Our mission across America must be to uncover the hidden history of those who have defended our freedom--and to spread that history to those who do not understand. The things that our veterans have lost—the things that they still carry silently with them—these are the things that will bind our history and our hope together.

My grandfather would do it again to protect my freedom. I raise my voice today to honor his.