

Remarks by Donald C. Winter
Secretary of the Navy
29th Annual Salute to the Military
Mississippi Coast Coliseum Convention Center
Biloxi, MS
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Mr. Chairman (Congressman Gene Taylor), I can't tell you how glad I am to be here this evening. Thank you for your kind introduction, and thank you for your many years of strong support for the U.S. military.

From my point of view, the Navy and Marine Corps are fortunate to have such a consistently effective advocate on Capitol Hill.

A special thanks is also due to the Mississippi Gulf Coast Chamber of Commerce for sponsoring this event.

The military services are stronger, more committed, and more highly motivated than ever as a result of your enthusiastic support.

I understand profoundly the sense of gratitude you feel towards our military, and I believe America should never pass up an opportunity to honor those who serve.

I feel very privileged, indeed, to have been asked by Secretary of Defense Gates to be here today to tell you why the heart of every patriotic American swells with pride at the mere mention of the courage and sacrifice of those who wear the uniform under our Nation's banner.

It is fitting that this event has found a home in Biloxi, a city with unique charms, and a place that has much in common with the many small towns and rural areas of this region in its long tradition as the birthplace of military heroes.

As you heard earlier this evening, one of our guests of honor was taken ill and is unable to join us.

I was very much looking for to seeing Jack Lucas, and we wish him well.

Although he is not here in body, he is here with us in spirit, and I do wish to honor his extraordinary contributions to our Nation.

The story of Jack Lucas—that you heard a little bit of earlier—almost defies belief.

It is impossible to keep a dry eye when hearing the tale of his almost superhuman determination to serve his country in World War II and distinguish himself on the battlefield.

Immortalized in the recent book “Indestructible,” the Jack Lucas story is a story about the heart of a warrior.

By his own account, he was a troubled kid. He was rebellious by nature and who loved to fight.

He was a young man with an attitude.

But he was also a young man who had been “reared with a profound love of country.”

A son of the South, Jack’s upbringing was by no means unusual in that regard.

And if the number of those from this part of the country who volunteer to join the military is any indication, that spirit is still alive and well in the South.

The rest of the Jack Lucas story is now famous—how Private Lucas managed to find a way to get himself into combat, ending up on Iwo Jima, throwing himself on a grenade while grabbing a second grenade and pulling it beneath his body, thus saving the lives of three fellow Marines.

At 17, Private Jack Lucas, by his heroic actions, entered history by becoming the youngest Marine ever to receive the Medal of Honor.

All of us feel very humbled in the face of such extraordinary courage, enormous sacrifice, and selfless heroism.

All we can do is thank him—and resolve to do all we can to make America worthy of his sacrifice.

Few of us could ever hope to be equal to such an amazingly high standard of valor, but I daresay that those who follow in his footsteps—Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, Airmen, Guardsmen and reserves, from Biloxi and surrounding areas—are doing work that ought to make all of us very proud.

They are serving as Seabees, meteorologists, electronics technicians, computer specialists, civil engineers, combat readiness trainers, pilots, aircraft mechanics, and countless other specialties across the services at Keesler, in Gulfport, at the Stennis Space Center, and at various military activities throughout the Gulf Coast region.

Now, while Biloxi is not a fleet concentration center by the normal Navy definition, it surely is a Defense Department-wide concentration center.

All branches of the military services in this area of the country can be considered indispensable, vital components of the war effort.

It is worth noting that the very same

Marine Corps Reserve unit at the Marine Reserve Detachment Center in Gulfport that used heavy gear to rescue stranded civilians from rooftops after Katrina has twice deployed to Iraq.

Similarly, the same Seabees who supported recovery efforts after Katrina are the Seabees that are routinely deployed to Iraq—many as part of units that have completed multiple tours.

Nearly 50 percent of the local National Guard have deployed to Iraq.

The Combat Readiness Training Center in Gulfport is also a critical element in our warfighting capability.

Many other units have an impact far beyond what the public may realize.

To take just one example among many, the Air Force's 81st Training Wing at Keesler, which trained more than 27,000 students last year, has an enormous impact on our warfighting capability in the air.

Everywhere you look—all along the Gulf Coast, you find highly specialized units filling requirements that perform a critical function in our nation's defense.

However, as Secretary of the Navy and taking note of the Navy's 232nd birthday—which we just celebrated this past weekend—it would seem appropriate for me to mention the contributions of another sort that are equally vital to the Navy—and to our future.

I am referring to the contributions that many of you here make as members of our industrial base.

Those contributions are especially critical to the Navy's shipbuilding program.

Our troops could not do what they do without your efforts to build and maintain the fleet.

You are following in the tradition of your fathers and grandfathers of the Gulf Coast region, who helped our Nation prevail in World War II by responding with patriotic fervor.

Alabama Drydock and Shipbuilding Co., Gulf Shipbuilding, Ingalls Shipbuilding Corp., Delta Shipbuilding and Avondale Marine Ways were among the U.S. shipyards that produced 4,600 ships for the war effort.

Ingalls alone, by June 1945, had built more than 70 ships.

Today, in similar fashion, you are helping us win the war on global jihadists, and preparing for future challenges tomorrow as America's shipbuilders.

We must maintain a dual focus—on future threats, and on the threats facing us today.

The contributions to our Nation's defense—from those I have mentioned tonight and so

many others—allow us to sleep safely at night.

They are the ones who are standing in the way of those who, today, openly seek our destruction.

Our terrorist enemies wish to change our way of life.

Our freedom offends them.

Our belief that the people are sovereign violates their creed.

Our desire to live and let live finds no sympathy.

Our expressions and gestures of goodwill are mocked—and perceived as signs of weakness.

There is no reconciliation, no common ground, with people of such disposition.

And so, defend ourselves, we must.

We must rise to the challenge that faces us, and act boldly in freedom's cause.

In some ways, the struggle for freedom is as old as human history, and has continued from age to age, and generation to generation.

As Americans—who are pioneers in this epic battle between the forces of freedom and the forces of tyranny—we instinctively recoil at threats to our freedom.

Nevertheless, we should heed the advice of President Ronald Reagan, who reminded us that, and I quote:

“Freedom is a fragile thing and is never more than one generation away from extinction. It is not ours by inheritance; it must be fought for and defended constantly by each generation, for it comes only once to a people. Those who have known freedom and lost it, have never known it again.”

All of us are standing on the shoulders of those brave patriots who have fought and died for our freedom, so that we may enjoy the blessings of liberty declared in our Declaration of Independence and now claimed as our birthright.

I would like to now ask our veterans here tonight to please stand.

When Americans honor “those who shall have borne the battle,” we pay tribute to you and to all those who have taken up the call as champions of freedom.

You provide inspiration to those serving today, and to those who will serve tomorrow—including eight Young Marines, with us here tonight as our special guests.

Thank you for your service and your sacrifice.

You, and all those who serve today, have dedicated your lives to a great and worthy

cause, and all of us are in you debt.

Thank you; may God bless you and America.