Proud of Our Past, Confident in Our Future

This year, our nation celebrates a number of historic commemorations, a series of events that should serve to remind us of the vital role our Army has long played in preserving the liberties and freedoms of this great nation. One of those is the 200th anniversary of the War of 1812, which has become known as America’s second war for independence, a conflict that finally ensured this nation’s freedom, security and preeminence in the Western Hemisphere.

That victory became more than a military success; it also ushered in a period historians call the Era of Good Feelings, a time when national pride created a new sense of unity and purpose on our shores. There is no greater monument or memorial to that time in American history than the “Star-Spangled Banner,” penned by Francis Scott Key as
he witnessed the U.S. Army and Fort McHenry’s commander, MAJ George Armistead, lead a valiant and triumphant defense of Fort McHenry in Baltimore, Md.

This past Memorial Day, we also began marking the 50th Anniversary of the Vietnam War, a time President Obama recently described as “one of the most painful chapters in our history … most particularly,” he noted, “how we treated our troops who served there.”

When those hostilities ceased, there were no ticker tape parades or joyous public homecomings. At the time, America failed to properly say thank you for the service, valor and sacrifice of those who fought and died in Vietnam and Southeast Asia. We must never again repeat such a tragic oversight.

Today, as we commemorate anniversaries of long-ago conflicts, the U.S. Army is at work marking another milestone, one not yet measured in generations or round numbers—more than 11 years at war in Afghanistan.

Since our nation was first attacked on September 11, 2001, much has changed. Two of history’s most infamous tyrants have been met with justice. We have rid the world of scores of nefarious terrorist leaders, along with thousands more who swore a singular allegiance to do harm to free people everywhere. Also in recent years, we ended the war in Iraq on our terms and are preparing for a successful drawdown in Afghanistan.

Leaving these two theaters provides us the opportunity to take the steps necessary to increase our operational capability and allow the Army and the nation to reset and refocus. Indeed, much of that effort has already begun—adjusting our end strength, properly resourcing our primary acquisition programs, and rebalancing our force posture to more effectively support our new national strategic focus on the Asia-Pacific region.

Since the Department of Defense first unveiled this effort, a number of pundits and critics have questioned what role, if any, the U.S. Army might play, simplistically purporting that such a strategy will depend solely on naval and air forces. Reality paints a far different picture.

The fact is, the Pacific is home to some of the largest land masses on earth. Indeed, seven of the world’s 10 largest armies are located in this region, and 22 of its 27 nations currently have an army officer serving as their chief of defense. Today, contrary to the opinions of some, the U.S. Army already has a strong personnel presence in that theater.
In August, I traveled to observe Khaan Quest 12, a military exercise conducted near Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, where 1,000 soldiers from 10 countries—including the United States—participated in training and maneuvers to strengthen our military cooperation and enhance regional peacekeeping capabilities. I then visited Korea, where we continue to observe the 60th Anniversary of what has become known as the Forgotten War.

Nowhere on earth can we find a more stark example of how quickly conflict can occur and how important the Army’s role in the Pacific has been, and continues to be, in securing regional stability. I’m reminded of the words of GEN Omar Bradley, who succinctly observed that “only one military organization can hold and gain ground in war—a ground army supported by tactical aviation with supply lines guarded by the navy.” Bradley’s words are as true today as ever. America’s Army has long been a force for good, wherever the call has sounded. Our new national strategic posture not only recognizes, but embraces, this reality.

With confidence in our new way forward, we must also maintain a rigid focus on our ongoing mission in Afghanistan. Nothing is more important than continuing to provide our warfighters the resources necessary to complete the military mission successfully and return our soldiers home safely.

For the Army, that will present a particular challenge. Unlike our sister services, we generally lack “big ticket” items: aircraft carriers or next-generation fighter planes. Simply put, our greatest asset, and our largest expense, has always been our people.

And people will, inescapably, feel the impact of our declining budgets.

At the same time, we are called upon to come to terms with a new reality here at home: smaller, leaner budgets and a smaller, more agile Army. Since the attacks of 2001, the Army has benefitted from a well-resourced force and a government able and willing to fund our every requirement. With a shaky global economy, however, and the total drawdown of combat forces first in Iraq, and soon in Afghanistan, we simply must take the steps necessary to reduce costs and wisely curtail spending.

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Indeed, as we build the Army of 2020, we are presently scheduled to decrease our active Army end strength from a recently authorized peak of about 570,000 to approximately 490,000 over the next five years.

For all their difficulties, the challenges that lie ahead are hardly new. Throughout history, and throughout our Army’s history, prolonged eras of conflict most often led to prolonged periods of declining military resources.

Writing between World Wars I and II, Charles de Gaulle noted in the classic French military essay, “The Edge of the Sword,” that there is most always “friction between soldiers and statesmen, since the latter are forever trying to find ways of saving money, while the former are constantly urging increased expenditure.” The French leader noted, too, that “it does, of course, occasionally happen that a lesson recently learned, or an immediate threat, compels them to agree.”

Most experts do agree we must become better stewards of increasingly scarce taxpayer dollars.

The opportunity we have at this moment in time is to break with the historic trends whereby budget cuts led to diminished military might. The fact is, unlike in years past, we’ve been given a real chance to “get it right.”

As we embark upon our new way forward we must, above all else, do those things necessary to acknowledge the people who sacrificed so much to build the greatest land force the world has ever known. We need to keep them engaged and, most of all, in the Army. Properly training, developing and utilizing soldiers and civilians in the future will be critical to ensuring our nation’s continued security and our Army’s future success.

In such challenging times, we must make every effort to keep others from determining our fate. In that regard, we will have to exercise the leadership and initiative necessary not only to get smaller but also to become smarter and better. Our success can be realized only if we confront this new era directly and act decisively to cast our own fate and future. In short, we must muster the determination and imagination required to meet the nation’s needs within emerging budget constraints.

For example, we continue my ongoing initiative to fundamentally restructure the institutional Army, the so-called Generating Force. As I’ve written previously, finding new ways to provide services, equipment, training and support to soldiers, civilians and their family members will serve to cut costs while also improving delivery.

Through that initiative, we’ve already realized significant progress in such areas as contracting and acquisition, better ensuring that soldiers get what they need when they need it, while securing best value for taxpayers. This is the type of effort that we will need to expand in the days ahead.

Undeniably, a number of tomorrow’s most important and vexing challenges will be neither budgetary nor strategic; rather, they will be human. More than a decade of war has inflicted a heavy toll on our soldiers and their families. Some of those effects are tragically visible, battlefield injuries of every description. On the other hand, some cannot be so readily seen: traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress and the other invisible wounds that war so indiscriminately imparts.

We are working every day to meet and overcome these challenges through constant medical innovation and groundbreaking treatment and research. We are committed to improving the health of the entire force through training, treatment and care, and we are fostering an environment in which soldiers know that it’s okay to ask for help, and their buddies know to get involved and lend a hand.

To truly keep our soldiers healthy and well-cared-for, however, we have to do even more to keep them safe, whether at home or deployed, whether from themselves or someone else. That means taking on tough problems such as suicide and sexual assault.

These are especially heart-wrenching issues, anathema to our Army values and the Warrior Ethos. Each day, Army leaders are working diligently to address these critical issues with new programs, better ideas and continuous resolve, but every soldier, every civilian, and every member

MAJ Sylvia Lopez and SFC John Battista were awarded Army Commendation Medals during a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the Guard Resilience University, a training school at the Wisconsin Army National Guard’s 426th Regional Training Institute at Fort McCoy, Wis.
of the Army family has a responsibility to do their part as well. In short, only a service-wide effort will ensure the Army reduces and ultimately eliminates these crucial challenges and, by so doing, help heal all our soldiers’ wounds.

These are perplexing times, but despite the complexities of our problems we must, as much as any other measure, return to basics. Secretary Panetta’s choice of Fort Bragg, N.C., earlier this year to express his concern over what he sees as a breakdown in discipline and standards across the nation’s military should serve as a reminder to all of us that we must strive every day to be better, to become an example not of what is broken, but of what works.

As isolated as these incidents may be, however, they show, as Secretary Panetta noted, “a lack of judgment, a lack of professionalism, and a lack of leadership” that put “servicemembers at risk … hurt morale … and … damage our standing in the world.” Our enemies seek every advantage against us, and it takes only seconds for one picture to become an international headline.

Good order and discipline do more than save us from bad headlines; they take a weapon away from this nation’s foes. For all its importance, this is not solely a matter of our standing in the world; it is a question of our posture here at home as well.

A division commander once told me his biggest fear for his soldiers’ safety wasn’t when he sent them outside the wire in Afghanistan. Rather, it was those times he issued them a weekend pass while back home. The stress and strain of more than a decade at war—repeated deployments and extended time away from family, friends and support—affect different people in different ways. Each soldier, civilian and family member needs to be aware and engaged and offer compassion to those seeking help, counsel for those who need guidance and intervention for those who have lost their way.

The uniform our soldiers wear represents much more than the U.S. Army. It represents our core values: selflessness, respect, discipline and good judgment. In short, it represents our nation and all its high ideals. It is the uniform worn valorously in the battle of New Orleans, at Inchon and on Pork Chop Hill, in Da Nang and Khe Sanh, in Kandahar, Kabul, and Mazar-e-Sharif, in conflicts near and far, large and small, throughout the Army’s 237 years.

This year, every year, our Army celebrates a proud and glorious past. Its soldier, its strength—the strength of our nation—will ensure an even brighter, safer and more hopeful future for all Americans and those citizens everywhere who share our dreams and hope for a better, more peaceful world.