



Thank You Lt. Ehren Watada

Text of Speech from March 17, 2007 Rally in Eugene, OR

I would like to thank all of you for your tremendous support and encouragement. It is not unnoticed nor will it ever be forgotten.

I know that there are times when we lose hope out of frustration and cynicism. I know that at times it seems so terrible it is easy to give in to despair. I have been there. I know at times we feel trapped and powerless. I have been there. I know that you have felt anger and betrayal. I have been there. I know that at times it seems easier to take the path less-traveled when the alternative means discomfort, humility, and sacrifice. I have been there.

But we can never lose hope; we can never give in; we can never surrender to the forces of violence, extremism, and greed. We must commit to peace as a first resort because violence only begets violence. Am I a pacifist? Apologetically, no. But I can unequivocally say that the majority of human beings in this world desire peace, justice, and happiness—not war, not suffering, and not death.

We must not quite; America stands for much, much more. An injustice to one, is an injustice to all. If we ignore, if we leave the problems of our country to others—inevitably those problems will end up on our doorstep no matter where we are, no matter how far we run.

We talk a lot about unalienable, god-given rights. But I believe, the only inherent human right we are given and no one can ever take away is the right to choose. Only each individual person can take away that right from themselves. When we do, we have create an invisible and inescapable prison of our own creation. I sat in this prison and it tore me apart. I sat in there until I came to the realization that I am free. I am free because I can choose. Be there no mistake, the right to choose may come with harsh consequences—often the hard choices do. But we must never forget: though they may imprison, torture or take our lives—they can never take away our freedom to choose what is right and what is just.

We stand on the precipice of perilous times for our country and the world. It may very well be the likes of which we have never seen before. I saw what was possible if I remained silent—if I remained immobile. To be silent is to consent, enable and condone—none of which I could morally do. I was afraid of what they would do to me. But I was even more afraid of what would happen if I did nothing. Where were the good Americans they will say? I would answer: they were here, fighting for their country; they were here, fighting for us all.

Every act, no matter how small or insignificant has a purpose and a role despite our inability to see it. This works in war as it does in peace. But in peace, it is the decision to act that counts. Everyone has an opinion—it is the willingness to act on that belief that makes it a principle and worthwhile. It is what makes life worth living. It can be terrifying to imagine what some people would do if they acted on their beliefs. It is just as terrifying to imagine what people won't do for their beliefs.

It is always easier to expect and depend on others to act first or to act for you. In my case, I was no different. In my situation, not only did I expect but I depended on others to act and speak on my behalf. When it never came to pass, I realized that I was someone fully capable of acting, fully capable of speaking, and fully responsible for what I did and did not do. I knew that before I could expect others to act, I had to take that first step.

Some of us believe that at the end of our lives we will be judged. Whether we are judged by a higher presence or even by ourselves, I could not look back upon my life knowing that when I finally realized the truth, I ignored what was conscionable and right. I could not look upon the judging

innocence of my future children's eyes and tell them to always do what is right—except when it is difficult, except when there are consequences.

We have come a long way as a species—as human beings. We have attempted to shed the injustice of class and discrimination for a more humane world that shows equality for all. But we have often fallen short. We are a people that still struggle with racism and bigotry. We are a world where many of our brothers and sisters live in poverty and despair, while few profit immensely and the rest ignore this plight. How can we look on a world as such and feel moral—that the life of one is more important than another? We must not stop, we must not rest until we ensure that every American and then every person has the right to civil liberties, healthcare, education, and a meaningful say in how their lives are governed. We must not stop until every life is valued equally.

We must never forget that we are a people who live under the rule of truth and law. If a law is unjust then it must be changed. If the truth is unclear it must be brought to light. Those who govern must always be held to account. No person, just as no country can hold itself above the law.

Finally, it is easy to give in, to relent—to believe this is the way things will always be: man oppressing man, suffering, hatred—an endless cycle of destruction. But it doesn't have to be. This is no more assured than fate dictating our lives. As Martin Luther King Jr. once taught us:

Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable... Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals.

People have fought and died through the millennia so that many of us can enjoy the fruits of life today. There will always be evil. But we must never give up hope. We will fight with every last dying breath. We will defy what they say cannot be beaten. We will overcome.