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Remarks by Senator Edmund S. Muskie to the Waterville Veterans of Foreign Wars

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Recommended Citation

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Transcript REMARKS OF SENATOR EDMUND S. MUSKIE
WATERVILLE VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS
OCTOBER 20, 1970

~~Senator Muskie Speaking to the VFW Post, Waterville, Maine, October 20, 1970~~

~~Thank you very much Leonard, Commander Jack Thompson, for the President Dorio de Paris and good friends all. I beg to wonder whether the non-political character~~

~~of the VFW had been abolished. But~~ For all those who are not members of this group, of which I regard myself as a member, I think I ought to make it clear at the outset that this is not a political organization or a veterans organization but a group of old friends. I regret to say that we have with us tonight some members of the national press. I regret it not because I don't like them, because I do, not because I don't appreciate their importance, because I do, not because I'm not glad personally to have them here because I am, but because the kind of relationship that is represented by the people of this room is more personal than anything else. I'm not sure that anyone looking in from the outside can fully appreciate what it is that brings us together tonight or that started us down a road together a quarter of a century ago. I can't find the words to say how much I appreciate ^{your} thoughtfulness in arranging this meeting or this presentation. I know how much they mean to you and that makes them mean all the more to me. Leonard has recalled a great many memories which have been flooding in upon me in the last few moments and I've thought of what happened, what took place, the things we did a quarter of a century ago. This building, for example, used to be a school. All of us, except a few, remember that. It used to be a polling place. It used to be the headquarters of Ward 6 democracy in the days when only two of the seven Waterville wards could be counted upon as a friendly haven for democrats in Waterville. So in a very real sense this ward and ward 7 next door were the breeding grounds of my political hopes and ambitions. And it wasn't an easy labor because in those days democracy didn't have many prospects even in this city where we did better than we did in most places in Maine. And so ^(there are) a great many friends in this room tonight with whom I was associated in the work of veterans following World War II and in political work here in this city. I can see so many in this room with whom I was privileged to work in advancing the cause of veterans. Some of you worked with me as we tried to give birth to a new veterans organization, Am Vets. And then we tried to bring youth to old veterans organizations, the VFW and the American Legion. There was a Marine Corps ^{base} here in the city for a short time and ^{there are some who} in this room were members of that organization. Then we thought it would make sense if all of the veterans organizations worked together and we formed a Veterans Council. And as I remember, the principle work of that group, and I can't remember any that followed, was the work of bringing back to this city the bodies of those who died in World War II.

no 9

And I can remember the parades, funeral processions, which we organized, in which we were privileged to march, ^{and} some of which I was privileged to lead as we welcomed those boys back home, with the help of so many in this room. ¶ And that was important work to us. And it sprang out of, I think, ~~many motivations~~ ^{a good many motivations}, two of which I can pick out of the Chaplain's prayer earlier this evening. First, a feeling of pride that we and the dead had been privileged to fight for our country and for values we thought were important to preserve. Secondly, because we saw the responsibility to be of help to the needy and the afflicted. I think those are the words the Chaplain read tonight and I recall them from those days years ago. ¶ So these veterans organizations, ^{which} had difficulty in organizing, and enlisting and recruiting members, nevertheless were made up of a hard core of civic minded, patriotic, and compassionate men who had been privileged to fight in our country's wars and who wanted to find a way here at home to serve the same causes and the same values. And as for AmVets and the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Legion, the Veteran's Council, the Marine Corps League, and then the Korean War Veterans and then the Vietnam War Veterans, this is what brings you together and has kept you together through difficult periods. ¶ We live in a time when—as the beautiful song which we heard tonight reminded us—~~as~~ patriotism is a word that seems something less than fashionable. I'd like to say something about that. I think that isn't really true, certainly not with those of our generation. ¶ But I don't think it's true of the young as well. What troubles them is that when we speak of patriotism we are ^{only} using a word. They know what they would like ~~the~~ patriotism to represent. And they believe in the same things that we did and still do in these terms. ¶ They'd like to give patriotism the kind of meaning that you and I have always associated with it, Love of country to us always meant love of what country represents for the rank and file citizens. Freedom and equality and opportunity, the right to build something better, the right to hope for something better, and the right to do something about it. ¶ Fighting ~~which~~ in a war which involved, as we understood it, our national survival, was that sort of thing. When you fight a war you have a very specific way to work for these values which mean so much to a free people. It's when the war is over and ended that fighting for these things becomes more complicated and difficult. And that's the kind of work we're about. ¶ As I recall the days and the weeks when we sought to create new veterans organizations or to strengthen old ones, what we were really looking for was a way to dedicate to our country's interests, and our city's interests ~~the~~ energies and the hopes and the efforts which could make this a better place in which to live. ¶ ^{focus}, but even more important, for those

who follow after us. And that's really what young people want as well. I tell you that from all the assurance I've gained out of speaking with and listening to young people in 45 of our 50 states in the last year and a half. There is no reason for any of us to be worried about the ideals of our young people. We do need to be concerned as to whether or not they will find the right way to achieve them, to work for them and to implement them. And in this sense, there is a wide gap between our generation and theirs because they haven't had the experience we've had, they haven't had the reason to believe that we do, that this country is on the right road. We need to change some things, even directions somewhat. But above all we need to resurface, bring to the ~~fore~~ ^{fore} all the things that you and I ~~have~~ ^{had} really believed in all of these years. And they're all wrapped up in the word patriotism, in the word country.

You know Thomas Jefferson, you and I often don't deal in these sorts of things, once said something about it ~~that~~ ^{that} you can understand that I can, and young people can as well. He said: "The first object of my heart is my own country. In that is embarked my family, my fortune, and my own existence." We see it that way; everyone who has been privileged to make a place for himself in this country sees it that way; those who do not ~~not~~ ^{not} have a place or a promise in it see it that way because they are seeking to make that place. Young people really see it that way. But in a sense we've made their problem more complicated than ours was. It was so much easier to fight in a war like World War II where we could see the direct threat to our national existence, ~~freedom~~ ^{freedom}, and all the values that we hold dearly. It's not so easy to see it with the war in South East Asia. And so we must be patient because they see their challenge, the burden and sacrifice they're requested to make from a different perspective than we did in World War II, and some of you, World War I. It wasn't difficult for us to answer the call. There was a clean, uplifting spirit ~~and~~ ^{and} feeling ~~that~~ ^{that} about fighting a war that threatened our country directly, ~~one~~ ^{one} that young people of draft age today have never felt, have never had reason to feel. But they really want our country to stand for the things that we fought to preserve. And they'd be willing to fight for our country if, in doing so, they thought they were fighting for the same things. How then do we close this gap? How do we develop understanding and communication? Well, in the same way that you and I always have. By talking ~~to~~ ^{with} each other, by listening to each other, by raising questions and discussing them and debating them and finally coming down hard on the real values that make this country worth fighting for. It is now, it always has, and it always will be. The real challenge of an organization such as this and a people like us is to carry into the future the

best of the past as we remember it. And to make clear to those who were born in the present that there is a great deal in the past that's worth taking into the future.

It is that which gives us continuity. It is that which gives us stability. It is that which gives us the sureness that we are on the right path, the path of creating a society in which people are free ~~free~~ to grow, free to make the most of the best that is in them, free to surmount their shortcomings and their weaknesses, free to deal with evil in the interest of promoting what is good, not only for ourselves but for everyone else in our country. And if we could just understand ~~that~~ what this is really all about is creating a country in which everyone can have a place ~~a~~ place of hope, a place to work, a place to build, a place to raise children, a place to make something better for them than we have known. That is what this country is about. That's what our children want. Pray to God ~~that~~ that is what their children will have one day. If we can ~~just~~ ^{just} keep alive those values that brought this group together in the first place more than a quarter of a century ago, those values which bring you here tonight. I can't think of anything that is moving for me than to have old friends say "Ed, will you come back and give us a chance to honor you?" This little ^{fiction} card which you've given me means much more than it says. It means you haven't forgotten me. May I say I have never forgotten you.