OCS 2026 Toast—September 14, at Santa Fe Hilton.

I'll start by recognizing the U.S. military members–women and men--who've been killed or wounded in this year's U.S.-initiated war against Iran. Bless them for their service and their sacrifice, bless their spouses and families—and bless also our colleagues who died or were wounded in Vietnam, along with their families--and all who've fought for America over the past 250 years.

I also want to thank everyone on the planning committee, and especially Lou Lallo, Scott Davis, Brian Flora, Bob Hines, Brian Walrath, and Mike Eberhardt for the nonstop, voluntary work they do to keep us all in touch and preparing for these get-togethers.

Next, here's thanks to you for the lasting benefits that you – directly or indirectly -- helped create for a wide swath of Americans by virtue of your service during the Vietnam War.

Here's a list that I often think about.

One: Building on an executive order issued by President Harry Truman in 1948, **Vietnam significantly furthered the move toward racial equality in the armed forces**. This subsequently helped boost steps the country took in the '60s and '70s to lessen or eliminate discrimination that had made second class citizens of lots of Americans--including many women. Such progress does seem to ebb and flow. But by participating in the military's efforts to eliminate racism you helped create the flow.

Two: All wars lead to medical advances, and the list of those from Vietnam is lengthy, including:

U.S. hospitals now have more treatments for life-threatening injuries, based on innovations that saved the lives of wounded soldiers in Vietnam. And Vietnam led to the recognition of, and eventual treatments for, PTSD, which after previous wars had been called “shell shock” or “combat fatigue” and left untreated.

Directly--if you were wounded--or indirectly, by ending up in harm’s way, you helped implement these changes that benefit many Americans today.

Three: Voting rights. Back in our day, you could be sent to Vietnam (and die there) as a teenager--but you couldn’t vote until you turned 21. The Vietnam war changed that by prompting Congress and 43 states (5 more than were required) to rapidly approve the 26th amendment to the constitution on July 1, 1971, well before the war ended. That amendment lowered the voting age to 18 (the age at which we all had to register for the draft), and today around half of all 18-year-olds are registered to vote—likely without realizing the debt they owe to all of you.

Four: The all-volunteer army. On July 1, 1973, in response to public opposition to a theoretically mandatory draft that had snared millions of young men to fight an “elective” war, in many cases after an inexcusably insufficient four months of basic and advanced infantry training, the U.S. switched to the all-voluntary military. Those who serve today still do so at the mercy of the type of poor leadership that H.R. McMaster, who served as President Trump’s National Security Advisor before retiring as a Lieutenant General in 2018, detailed in his 1997 book entitled: “Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and

The Lies That Led to Vietnam." But at least, today's soldiers have a choice. It's true that people who don't volunteer fail to learn what we did about how to manage, lead, and set and achieve goals, all key skills once you're back in civilian life. Yet opting out is understandable as long as America continues to engage in – and mostly lose – "elective" wars. And the fact that young Americans have that option is a testament to the impact that your service during the Vietnam War had on U.S. policy.

Five: Vietnam helped make a majority of Americans increasingly skeptical of the rationale for war. There have been exceptions: Public opinion never turned against the 1991 gulf war, during which a coalition of at least 35 countries, led by the U.S., took only about three months to achieve its clearly stated goal of reversing Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. And after the September 11th 2001 attacks on the U.S., it understandably took a very long time--a decade, in fact--for public opinion to turn against what turned out to be America's 20-year Afghanistan war.

Those instances aside, "elective" wars have lost their fan base.

U.S. public opinion on the Vietnam War turned negative in August of 1968—about 3.5 years after Gallup took its first poll. (It's hard to believe it took that long, though we have to remember that U.S. economic growth was strong during the early years of the war, that only about 40% of the 27 million men of draft age ended up in the military, that only about a quarter of that 40% ended up in Vietnam—and that not until the late '60s did many middle class college grads lose their draft deferments).

More recently, the U.S. public has reacted much faster. Popular support for the 2003 Iraq War—which stood at 76% at its beginning--turned negative after only 15 months, according to Gallup. That happened around the time the publication of the bi-partisan 9/11 Commission report made clear that Iraq had no part in the 9/11 attacks.

Then when the U.S. attacked Iran last February Americans turned thumbs down right away: From day one, at least 60% of the U.S. public has disapproved of that war, according to Pew Research.

A logical conclusion is that Vietnam marked the start of a trend that has made succeeding generations of Americans increasingly wary of the high cost in lives and dollars of elective wars. And everyone in this room, by virtue of your service during the Vietnam War, helped spur the public's condemnation of repeated U.S. military blunders.

Six: It took a while, but America has at long last recognized your contributions as citizen soldiers (to use a Brian Walwrath moniker). In 2017—44 years after the official end of U.S. military operations in Vietnam and 35 years after the dedication of the Vietnam Memorial -- Congress created National Vietnam War Veterans Day, which on March 29th every year quietly recognizes the 58,220 U.S. soldiers who didn't survive as well as those who returned home to no acclaim—and even, initially, to disdain from the VFW. March 29th, 1973, was the day U.S. combat troops officially withdrew from Vietnam—though it was another 25 months, on April 30, 1975, before the last U.S. troops and American officials left Saigon via helicopter from the roof of the U.S. embassy. That was

one day after the last two U.S. soldiers, both marines, were killed in Vietnam.

In conclusion, here's hoping that, at some point, future U.S. politicians will learn what they should have from our generation about the wisdom (or lack thereof) of engaging in elective wars. In the interim, here's recognizing all of you for the fact that your selfless service during a U.S. government misadventure that put millions of people in jeopardy both made clear which path not to follow and helped create lasting benefits for succeeding generations of everyday Americans.

And for that, here's thanks to all of you. RAISE A GLASS.