

Pershing Day Speech
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Laclede, MO
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Good afternoon. Thank you General Danner for that kind introduction. It is always great to visit the great Show-Me State. I want to thank Governor Nixon, Senator Bond, and the dignitaries of the World War I combatant nations for their presence here today as we honor and pay tribute to one of the most remarkable and extraordinary leaders in the annals of our Nation's history: General John Joseph "*Black Jack*" Pershing. I am truly honored and humbled to be asked to speak with you today as we commemorate the 150th anniversary of General Pershing's birth.

Much like many of you here in the audience today, General Pershing's beginnings started precisely where we stand in the heart of Missouri and our Nation. As a child born in Laclede, Missouri to a businessman father and a homemaker mother, he learned early on from his parents and this community the values of hard work, a good education and compassion for his fellow man.

Even at an early age, John Pershing demonstrated his moral courage and conviction. As a young school teacher during the late 1870's he taught local African-American students down the road in Prairie Mound, Missouri ...which I may remind you given the context of the times, was not a particularly popular or even socially accepted occupation. The negative stigma that may have been associated with his endeavors did not, however, deter John Pershing from what his upbringing had taught him to be the morally righteous path. **(PAUSE)** As the story goes, one day a local bully barged into the schoolhouse and offered his... **(COUGH) *passionate opinion***... that African-American children should not be afforded the opportunity to pursue an education. To which, John Pershing immediately confronted the man and forcibly removed him from the schoolhouse...even at an early age... ***that*** was the kind of man John Pershing was...a man of conviction, moral decency and courage. The ethical foundation instilled in him right here in central Missouri would continue to stay with him throughout his life, and would have a fundamental impact on the exceedingly extraordinary man he was to become.

Ironically, John Pershing's path to prominence was born of happenstance. As a student in 1881 at North Missouri Normal School, which today we know as Truman State University, he happened upon an advertisement for admission into West Point and decided to apply. Pershing would later admit the pursuit of a superior education, not military service itself, was his main motivation for applying for admission to West Point. As it would happen, the story goes he was able to secure his nomination into

West Point because he was the only the candidate that could properly structure a sentence. ***Lucky for us, another of Missouri's great sons, Mark Twain, was not a candidate that year.***

Even from the very beginning of his time at West Point it was clear that Cadet Pershing possessed the innate characteristics required to be a successful and charismatic leader. Although he was an average student, Pershing naturally excelled from the start in the art of leadership. Proof of his natural leadership abilities can be found in the fact that he held the highest rank possible within his cadet class each year he was at West Point. Prior to his senior year, he was elected the class president, and in that capacity he solemnly led the Corps of Cadets in the summer of 1885, as they crossed the Hudson to pay tribute to the funeral train of another of our Nation's greats: Ulysses S. Grant. So impressed with the young Cadet Pershing, the Superintendent of West Point General Merritt, personally commended Pershing for his talent - singling him out for his outstanding leadership qualities and his "superb ability". The qualities Pershing displayed at West Point were a forerunner of things to come.

Upon graduation, Pershing faced another crossroads of sorts. Owing to the value that he placed on the pursuit of knowledge and education, he briefly considered delaying his commission as an officer in the United States Army in favor of studying law. In fact, he actually petitioned West Point for a furlough of his commission to pursue just a course of action. Fortunately for our Nation, fate interceded and he ultimately withdrew his request in favor of active military service. This seemingly benign decision, made in the uncertainty of youth, paved the way for legend.

As Pershing entered the Army in 1886, he did so during a monumentally significant transitional period of time in our Nation's history. As the Nineteenth Century drew to a conclusion, our Nation's focus was increasingly shifting from mending the wounds of the Civil War and closing our frontiers towards becoming a dynamic and expanding world power. As a reflection of America's expanding role in the world, Pershing career quite literally spanned the globe. It was within this context of time and circumstances, Pershing was able to discover and learn the valuable lessons of military experience, and more importantly life, which would ultimately manifest themselves in the man that would lead America into the First World War.

Opportunity struck for Pershing with the outbreak of war between the United States and Spain in 1898. The war would serve to lead him out of relative obscurity to national prominence. With the onset of war, First Lieutenant Pershing was offered the brevet rank of Major upon the recommendation of the LTC T.A. Baldwin, who cited Pershing's "untiring energy, faithfulness, and gallantry". Having accepted the temporary

rank, Major Pershing found himself fighting once again alongside his faithful Buffalo Soldiers as they battled Spanish forces in Cuba and Puerto Rico. Major Pershing was awarded a Silver Star for his actions during the Battles of Kettle and San Juan Hills. As fate would have it, it was during these battles that he made a lasting impression on the soon-to-be President of United States, Teddy Roosevelt.

The now-President Teddy Roosevelt personally summoned Pershing back from the Philippines in 1903 in order to promote him to rank of Colonel. This move was highly unusual given the Army's traditional seniority-based promotion system, and the Army ultimately rejected the President's request because by law the President only had control over the promotions of officers to the rank of General. This move angered the President, and he petitioned Congress to authorize a diplomatic posting for Pershing while the dust settled. Finally, in 1905 President Roosevelt exercised his Presidential prerogative and promoted Pershing to the rank of Brigadier General.

General Pershing served in a variety of postings in the intervening years between 1905 and 1914. He was selected to command the 8th Cavalry Regiment at Fort Bliss, Texas in January 1914. Pershing moved to Fort Bliss unaccompanied by his family whom he left in the comforts of the Presido of San Francisco. Feeling comfortable in his new assignment he summoned his family to join him in the summer of 1915. As fate would have it, this was not to be. Tragedy struck Pershing on the morning of August 27th, 1915 when he received a telegram that his entire family, minus his six year-old son, Warren, had perished in a house fire. Some say that Pershing was never the same after this tragedy, yet he endured it, and continued to nobly and courageously serve his country.

In the wake of that very unfortunate tragedy, he led the 8th Cavalry Regiment during the 1916-17 Punitive Expedition to Mexico to capture Pancho Villa. Although ultimately unsuccessful in capturing Pancho Villa, the expedition provided invaluable in highlighting the shortcomings that the United States Army. With the clouds of war looming on the horizon for the United States, these were valuable lessons that General Pershing would heed.

Greatness came to Pershing upon America's entrance into World War I. After a short interview, President Woodrow Wilson selected General Pershing to command the American Expeditionary Force (AEF). The force at the time was a paper tiger. The Army and National Guard had just 27,000 men on its rolls at the time. General Pershing established the training models and mechanisms required to exponentially grow the Army to over 2 million men in little more than a year and a half.

Indeed, the Yanks were coming. The AEF landed in France with much fanfare, and our typical American swagger. However, the realities of trench warfare would soon set in. General Pershing was immediately confronted by the Allied Command's desire to split his force up to augment depleted French and British units. Facing the prospect of have the AEF piecemealed out, Pershing famously replied:

"We came [to France] American. We shall remain American and go into battle with Old Glory over our heads. I will not parcel out American boys."

To ward off this possibility, General Pershing ensured that AEF soon gained the needed experience they were lacking in the intricacies of trench warfare. The prospect of adding an additional million men to the Allied cause made it a distinct possibility that the war was entering its final stages. The mere appearance of the AEF energized the Allied cause by bolstering the sagging morale of the Allied forces after years of carnage. The fact was, these doughboys that General Pershing had trained, were tenacious fighters – what they lacked in experience they made up for in spirit and ingenuity. Having gotten their feet sufficiently wet, American units were ready when the Allies launched the last great offensive of the war in 1918. American units fought in major engagements such as the Second Battle of the Marne and the Meuse-Argonne Offensive and acquitted themselves quite well – reinforcing General Pershing's faith in them. The Allies rapid victories in the summer and autumn of 1918 forced Germany to eventually surrender. The rapid end of the war secured General Pershing's place in American history.

General Pershing returned to America as a conquering hero. Congress bestowed upon him the highest rank ever given to a living person in our Army's history, General of the Armies of the United States. Quite simply he was one of the greatest Americans of his generation, and was revered by the American public the rest of his days.

General Pershing's impact on the Army is still felt today. He quite simply is founding father of the modern United States Army. The organizational and training models that he established facilitated the United States Army entry into the 20th Century and would forever make it a credible and relevant military force on the world stage. The most lasting legacy of his leadership was in the stable of truly great military leaders that he mentored and educated in the arts of leadership and military science.

General Pershing once said, "*A competent leader can get efficient service from poor troops, while on the contrary an incapable leader can demoralize the best of troops*".

This is a lesson he would impart and instill in his subordinates. He personally mentored and fostered such legendary American military figures as Generals George Marshall, George Patton and Douglas MacArthur and countless others. America would reap the dividends of these efforts in the next World War.

General Pershing laid the foundation of the modern Army. The officers that he inspired and developed, led America to victory during World War II, and forged the American Army into its Post-War future. Today our leader development is grounded in the principles of military science and our Army's Professional Military Ethic that General Pershing so earnestly practiced. General Pershing personified the ideal Soldier - a professional expert in the art of war that is governed by his moral conscious. Much like the leaders in General Pershing day, our leaders today at every level of the Army face extraordinarily complex and uncertain situations on a daily basis. Confronted by these unique and taxing circumstances our leaders invariably make the right decisions time and again as a result of their character, values, and collective ethic... whose roots can be traced back to the ideals and lessons of our forefathers – forefathers such as General Pershing.

Fittingly, today marks another anniversary in our Nation's history. As we commemorate General Pershing's 150th Birthday, we must also pause to honor and reflect on the events of 9/11, the ramifications of which are still felt by our Nation today.

As the Chief of Staff of the United States Army, General Casey, said about the nature of this conflict:

“We are locked in a war against a global extremist network that is fixed on defeating the United States and destroying our way of life. This foe will not go away nor will they give up easily, and the next decade will likely be one of persistent conflict. At stake are the power of our values and our civilization, exemplified by the promise of America, to confront and defeat the menace of extremist terrorists. At stake is whether the authority of those who treasure the rights of free individuals will stand firm against the ruthless and pitiless men who wantonly slay the defenseless. At stake is whether the future will be framed by the individual freedoms we hold so dear or dominated by a demented form of extremism. At stake is whether we will continue to expand freedom, opportunity, and decency for those who thirst for it, or let fall the darkness of extremism and terror”.

Much like those that answered the Nation's call to service in World War I, today's generation of young Americans understand the implications of what is at stake and have answered Freedom's distress call. The so-called pundits that cite America as a declining power have not witnessed this generation in action. **Rest assured that I can**

tell you...the simple fact that America is able to produce such a magnificent and dynamic generation is proof positive that this country's brightest days still lay ahead of it.

Our military members today represent the very best of America. They are a generation of men and women that saw our Nation brutally attacked 9 years ago today, yet elected to serve – knowing full well that they would confront the enemies of our Nation on obscure battlefields halfway across the world. Yet much like when General Pershing tragically lost his family, they have never wavered or questioned their duty to their nation. This generation quietly stands among the generations of Americans that have gone before, standing in the gap between the evil of the world and the values of our Nation and Constitution.

Many in this country do not yet fully realize the incredible value and impact that this 9/11 generation is having, and will continue to have, on our society - for they are a humble, resilient and focused generation. They represent our Nation's future - among their ranks are the future leaders of our society – leaders of industry, leaders of our communities, and leaders of our Nation.

I have no doubts that history will be kind to them. Their service and sacrifice have protected the free world from tyranny and evil, they have restored freedom and inspired hope where it was absent, and they have confronted and repulsed extremism, violence, and exclusion in all corners of the world. Much like General Pershing, they seek moderation, tolerance, and inclusion for all of humanity. They protect, defend, and advocate for the downtrodden and defenseless. They are indeed a reflection of you – the American people

In closing, I ask that we all remember those Americans whom tragically lost their lives 9 years ago today. May we always remember and honor their sacrifice.

May we also remember all those brave members of the 9/11 generation that are standing watch for us around the globe protecting and defending freedom and democracy.

God bless the great state of Missouri.

May God bless over and protect her native sons and daughters who are in harm's way...following in the footsteps of past Missourians, like General Pershing, whom have answered their Nation's call to service during war.

And may God continue to bless the United States of America!

Army Strong!

[2666 words = ~20 mins]