

Daniel L. Haulman

Today is November 11. Veterans Day. Let me ask how many veterans are here today? Thank you for your service to our country.

November 11 used to be Armistice Day, the anniversary of the day World War I ended in 1918. The armistice began on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month. Eleven o'clock on the eleventh of November.

World War I was supposed to be the war to end all wars. Other wars followed, and Armistice Day became a day not only to remember World War I and its veterans, but also to remember our veterans from all wars.

Veterans Day is the renamed Armistice Day, but sometimes it is confused with Memorial Day. On Memorial Day, at the end of May, we remember those who died for our country in war and battle. Veterans Day is a little different. We remember not only those who died, but also those who have served, but who survived the battles or wars in which they fought. There are a lot more veterans than service men and women who died in battle. Yet they all served their country at the risk of their lives, and on this day we honor them.

We also honor the rights for which our veterans have fought. Most countries have veterans, but not all of them have fought for the same causes.

For what cause have our veterans fought? They have all sworn to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States of America. American veterans swear allegiance not to any leader or set of leaders or party. They swear allegiance to the Constitution.

Today I want to talk about the rights for which our veterans have fought. They are defined in our Constitution. They are the ideals that make us free. There are so many rights we have here in the United States, I do not have time to speak about each one of them, but I want to speak about some of our leading rights, which are defined in the Constitution, but which are not given by any government. They are given by God. It is worthwhile periodically to remember our rights, and what better day to do that than Veterans Day?

The Declaration of Independence of 1776 states that “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers

in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.” In these brief words is the essential philosophy of American government. Our rights do not come from a government that can give or take them away at the will of whoever is in control of the government. They come from God. Our government is a means, not an end, of protecting the rights that God has given us. The reason for government is to protect these God-given rights. Governments have limited powers. Their just powers come from the consent of the governed. In other words, government should not only be limited but it should also be representative. A government has no authority over people who have no authority over it. It serves the people rather than commanding them to serve it. If a government fails to protect the rights of the people, and represent them, the people have a right to change that government. The way we normally do that is with regular elections. We can also change the government by amending the Constitution.

The first amendment to the Constitution, the first article in the Bill of Rights, expresses some of the most important of our rights as Americans and as human beings. “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or of abridging freedom of speech, or of the press, or of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition

the government for a redress of grievances.” First is freedom of religion: the right of each individual to worship God as he pleases, and to hold his own opinions with regard to religion. No one is required to belong to any religious organization, or to contribute to one, and no one is forbidden from organizing or joining a religious organization or contributing to one. In other words, religious practices are neither forbidden nor required of anyone. No one is punished for what he or she believes or does not believe. No one is punished for practicing his or her religion. Freedom of religion goes along with freedom of thought. Churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques thrive with voluntary membership and contributions. No one is taxed to support any church or synagogue or temple or mosque.

Consistent with freedom of thought is freedom of expression. Freedom of speech and the press, or the ability to say and write what we think, are among the most fundamental of our rights as Americans and as human beings with God-given rights. No one should be punished for what he or she thinks, or for expressing what he or she thinks. Would-be dictators hate this right. They do not want to allow freedom of thought or speech or press, because if they do, they know their powers will be challenged. Where there is freedom of speech

and freedom of the press, where people say and write what they think, there is also freedom of religion. You cannot have one without the others.

I once had a conversation with a graduate student in the history department at Auburn University who was from Nepal. He once told me that if he were ever the head of his country, he would ban Christian missionaries. I told them he could not ban Christian missionaries without banning freedom of expression. If a country allows people to say and print what they believe, it will automatically allow missionaries.

Closely related to freedom of religion, speech, and the press, is freedom of assembly and the right to petition the government for redress of grievances. In other words, a person can protest what the government is doing without fear of punishment. He can also do that with others. Joining others in voluntary associations is also a fundamental right in a free country.

Amendment 2 of the Constitution concerns the right to keep and bear arms. It was written not just to protect the right of an individual to keep and bear arms, but also the rights of states to have militias, so that all military power would not be concentrated in the hands of the central government. The authors well remembered when the British government wanted to deny Americans, not only as individuals but as members of state militias, to have

arms, because only arms could prevent the British government from carrying through its policies of coercion. Closely related is the freedom from having to quarter soldiers in our homes during peacetime, a right spelled out in the third amendment.

Amendment 4 protects Americans from unreasonable searches and seizures. The authors remembered when the British government broke into the homes and businesses of Americans seeking evidence of rebellion.

Amendment 5 defines many of our legal rights as Americans: the right to be indicted only by a Grand Jury for serious crimes; freedom from being tried twice for the same offense; freedom from forced confessions, or torture; due process of law; and just compensation for private property taken for public use.

Amendment 6 spells out other legal rights: right to a speedy public trial by an impartial jury in the state or district where a crime took place; the right to know the charges; the right to confront witnesses against you; the right to obtain defense witnesses; the right to a lawyer. Amendment 7 extends the right to trial by jury to civil lawsuits involving more than twenty dollars. Amendment 8 prohibits excessive bail and fines and forbids cruel and unusual punishments.

Amendments 5, 6, 7, and 8, taken together, are the most important parts of the

Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments to the Constitution, in terms of our legal rights.

Amendments 9 and 10 further limit the power of the federal government. Amendment 9 notes that just because a right is not spelled out in the Constitution does not mean that it does not exist. The implication is that our rights are not defined by our government, but are God-given. Amendment 10 notes that powers not given by the Constitution to the federal government, or prohibited by it to the states, are reserved to the states and the people. This is further proof that the government has limited authority, and cannot do whatever it wants.

Other amendments to the Constitution express other rights that the founding fathers had not addressed. Amendments thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen regard race, and resulted from the Civil War, or what some call the War Between the States. The 13th Amendment outlaws slavery. The 14th Amendment extended citizenship to former slaves by defining citizenship beyond race, and forbid states from denying to citizens of the United States the equal protection of the laws. The 15th Amendment forbid the states from denying anyone the right to vote on basis of race. The fourteenth and fifteenth

amendments were not fully enforced until the Civil Rights legislation of the 1960s, when “constitutional rights” became an important issue.

The 17th, 19th, 22nd, 23rd and 26th amendments, like the 15th, concern the right to vote and elections. The 17th amendment allowed Senators to be elected directly by the people of the states, instead of by the state legislatures, making them more directly responsible to average citizens. The 19th amendment extended the right to vote to women. The 22nd amendment limited the President to two terms. Amendment 23 allowed the people of the District of Columbia to vote for President, whereas before they could not do that since they were not in any state. Amendment 24 abolished the poll tax for federal elections, allowing more poor people to vote, and amendment 26 lowered the voting age to 18 years old, further expanding suffrage.

This review of our Constitutional rights illustrates that the United States has evolved over the years, extending rights to more and more of its citizens, and making government ever more responsive to them. It is good to periodically review our rights as the Constitution has expressed them, and to thank our veterans for defending them. Without our armed forces, we might not be able to exercise those rights which God has given us. Because we are able to exercise our rights, we are much more free than most of the persons in

the rest of the world. We do not have any more rights than anyone else in the world, since they come from the God who made us all, but we are able to exercise those rights because of our Constitution and the veterans who have given their lives to preserve, protect, and defend it.

Daniel Haulman

October 2014