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Throughout history, America's military has consistently exemplified the cultural diversity that defines our ideals and spirit of tradition. Individuals representing nearly every ethnicity have joined the ranks of our armed forces, honorably serving to protect America and our interests worldwide.

Among the stories of military accomplishment, there is a long history of valor and achievement by Hispanic Americans. Each year, between September 15th and October 15th, we observe National Hispanic Heritage Month and pay tribute to the contributions of the Hispanic community to our nation's success and prosperity. Some of the greatest examples of these contributions are demonstrated through the courage and selflessness of those Hispanic Americans who have served in America's armed forces.

Thirty-seven Hispanic Americans have been awarded the Medal of Honor, the highest award for military valor. Hundreds of others have received the Distinguished Service and Navy Cross - the second highest award for valor in the Army and Marine Corps, respectively. In the Marine Corps alone, five Marines of Hispanic descent have been awarded the Navy Cross over the course of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

One of these individuals is Marine Corps Sergeant Rafael Peralta, a San Diego native. While moving house-to-house in Iraq, Sergeant Peralta was severely wounded by enemy gunfire as he crossed an entryway into a home with several of his fellow Marines behind him. After pulling himself aside to make enough space for the others to enter and return fire, a grenade landed on the floor.

Still conscious, Sergeant Peralta reached for the grenade and pulled it into his body, absorbing a majority of the blast that would have otherwise inflicted severe damage on the other Marines. Sergeant Peralta was killed instantly but, because of his actions, his fellow Marines survived the incident.

For his bravery, the Marine Corps nominated Sergeant Peralta for the Medal of Honor. While

the chain of command, substantiated by multiple eye-witness accounts, confirmed his actions, the Secretary of Defense awarded Sergeant Peralta the Navy Cross - a citation that I have personally requested be upgraded to the Medal of Honor.

Sergeant Peralta is a national hero whose story takes its rightful place in our nation's history, along with the names of others who have made the ultimate sacrifice or risked their lives in order to save their fellow soldiers, Marines, sailors or airmen. It was more than 150 years ago when the first Hispanic American - Joseph De Castro - received the Medal of Honor for action during the Civil War. The most recent recipient, Captain Humbert Roque Versace, was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor in 2002 for his actions as a Prisoner of War during Vietnam. Together, these individuals underscore the significant contributions by Hispanic Americans and their stories, as well as examples of courage by others who are bonded by heritage, will inspire generations to come.

Today, there are 115,000 Hispanic Americans serving on active duty in support of our ongoing efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan while nearly a million others have served in America's armed forces over time. This service reflects the genuine commitment of Hispanic Americans to the principles of freedom and democracy - a commitment that will undoubtedly continue well into the future.

This month, let us take time to remember these heroes and all other Hispanic Americans who have stepped forward to serve in the armed forces. America salutes you.