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It's been 11 years since Sept. 11, 2001, and America has faced down enemies in Iraq and Afghanistan and stayed on offense in other pockets of the globe where terrorist organizations have attempted to regenerate. The post-Sept. 11 world is still a dangerous place, but thanks to the service and sacrifice of the men and women of the U.S. military in combat action over the past decade, America is safer today and better prepared to face the global terrorist threat of the 21st century.

The Sept. 11 terrorist attacks were a call to action for millions of Americans. Our all-volunteer force is filled with young, patriotic Americans who, second by second, watched as our nation was attacked by a group of terrorists who were targeting not just our homeland, but also our way of life. Many Americans have since stepped forward in service to the country, choosing to respond with an unapologetic willingness to lay down their lives so that future generations will never endure the same experience.

It was the same choice I made for myself when I quit my job and joined the Marine Corps in the days immediately following the Sept. 11 attacks. During my time in service as a Marine officer, I deployed three times, twice to Iraq and once to Afghanistan. What I witnessed was a new generation of American heroes proving their fortitude, committing to a cause bigger than themselves and demonstrating an unmatched determination.

Marines, sailors, soldiers and airmen have served with distinction. Altogether, more than a million Americans have served in Iraq and Afghanistan. Some have returned home to their families and to their lives before military service. Others have chosen to continue the fight, extending their service obligations. Some have returned home bearing the scars of war, while more than 6,000 Americans made the ultimate sacrifice. They all deserve our gratitude, not only for giving inspiration, but for reflecting the true goodness that comes from the hearts and minds of the American people.

There are heroes such as Army Sgt. First Class Alwyn C. Cashe, who was posthumously awarded the Silver Star for rescuing six of his fellow soldiers from a burning Bradley fighting vehicle while covered in flames.

There is Marine Sgt. Maj. Bradley Kasal, who was awarded the Navy Cross for covering the back of another wounded Marine with his own body and absorbing the shrapnel from a grenade blast. He refused extraction until other Marines had received medical attention.

There is Marine Corps Sgt. Rafael Peralta, who was posthumously nominated for the Medal of Honor for pulling a grenade into his body to protect the Marines in his vicinity. Peralta received the Navy Cross for his sacrifice, but like other Marines and soldiers who performed the same action, he soon may receive the Medal of Honor — an award that is long overdue.

There is also Air Force Staff Sgt. Robert Gutierrez, who was awarded the Air Force Cross. Sgt. Gutierrez was wounded by small-arms fire from Taliban fighters less than 30 feet away, fighting through a gunshot wound to the shoulder that had collapsed his lung. He did what many people might consider the unthinkable. He coordinated airstrikes against the enemy and directed aircraft cannon fire just 10 feet from his position. After calling for a rescue helicopter, he hiked a mile to the evacuation point.

The actions of Cashe and Peralta, Sgt. Gutierrez and Maj. Kasal are emblematic of Americans' selfless character and fighting spirit. They show that Americans don't give up but stand tall in the face of danger. They show how we pick ourselves up during difficult times and how we extend a helping hand to others, even when the risk is high. This is the American way.

While the Sept. 11 attacks will forever be a tragic event in our nation's history, they have restored a fundamental understanding in the world that the United States is good in its intentions, our people are resolute, and our faith in ourselves and each other is unbreakable.

Throughout operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, 10 Medals of Honor, 39 Navy Crosses, 25 Distinguished Service Crosses and more than 900 Silver Stars have been awarded. With each award for combat valor to come, Americans will be reminded that it's the heroes of the U.S. military who will continue leading the fight to make the world a safer place — as they have in the 10-plus years since the Sept. 11 attacks.