

Veterans Day Ceremony Keynote Address
Wm Conrad Veterans Memorial Gardens
November 11, 2024

Good morning, everyone.

Thank you AVP Burge for the kind introduction but more importantly, thank you for your service to this country and now to Langston University. Thank you to Dr. Mayberry, Mr. and Mrs. Williams, and the committee for the invitation to speak to you today. I'd also like to thank all the men and women who served as well as their families.

It is an honor to be with you today on this special occasion as we gather to express our profound gratitude to the men and women who have served and are currently serving in the United States Armed Forces. Today, the Town of Langston City, our surrounding communities, Langston University, and the Wm. Conrad Veterans Memorial Gardens join together to salute not only those in uniform but also the families who stand behind them—families whose collective service defines our theme for this year: “A Legacy of Loyalty and Service — It’s a Family Affair.”

Veterans Day offers us a moment to pause, reflect, and recognize the tremendous sacrifices that our military personnel make to protect our freedoms and uphold the values enshrined in the Constitution of the United States. But this year’s theme speaks to the special role of military families. It is not just the soldier, sailor, airman, or marine who serves—it is also the parents, siblings, spouses, and children who endure separation, uncertainty, and sometimes heartbreaking loss. These families teach us what resilience looks like. When a sibling enlists, it is the entire family that wears the uniform in spirit, bearing the weight of service together. And when multiple members of the same family serve, it amplifies the sacrifice and underscores the depth of their loyalty to this country, a country that has not always been loyal to them. For families like my husband’s, military service was a point of pride. I vividly recall my first time visiting his grandparents’ home and seeing the photographs of each of their sons and several of the grandsons, each in uniform, aligning the walls of their living room. It’s this collective service

of the Jackson family of West Monroe, LA that also opened the doors to economic and educational opportunities their descendants enjoy today.

As we reflect on the legacy of service, we must highlight the contributions of African American veterans, whose sacrifices are an essential part of our nation's military history. Here in Oklahoma, African Americans have served with distinction for generations, even in the face of segregation and discrimination. Many of these brave individuals came from small towns like Langston, bringing with them a deep sense of community, resilience, and pride.

One remarkable example is the legacy of the Buffalo Soldiers, members of all-Black Army regiments stationed at Fort Sill and other outposts throughout what is now Oklahoma. These men served on the western frontier after the Civil War, building towns, protecting settlers, and carrying out missions despite enduring racism and unequal treatment. We honor the Tuskegee Airmen, whose skill and bravery during World War II shattered myths about African Americans' abilities and opened doors for future generations of service members. We recognize the countless others, from Korea (where my father served) to Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan, who have stood in the line of fire and raised their right hand to defend our nation. Their contributions remind us that the American story is incomplete without acknowledging the courage and sacrifices of African Americans in uniform.

Langston University has a long and proud connection with the military. Many of our alumni have served in the armed forces, continuing the tradition of leadership and service beyond the classroom. During World War II, Langston alumni were among the African American men and women who enlisted to serve a nation that had not yet granted them full citizenship. They joined units like the Tuskegee Airmen, defying stereotypes and proving that excellence knows no color.

We are proud to say that Langston has always been more than a place of learning—it has been a community of service. Many veterans returning home to Oklahoma after serving abroad have enrolled here, building on their military discipline to earn degrees and contribute to their

communities. Today, we continue to serve veterans and military families through education and support programs that honor their sacrifice and empower them to succeed in civilian life.

Our theme this year resonates deeply with these stories. Military service has often been a shared experience among African American families. Many siblings, parents, and children have served side by side, carrying the torch of loyalty to country. Their sacrifices show us that service is not just about duty—it's about family. I remember when I was a child in the 70s, my grandmother would host and attend Mother's Club meetings with other ladies in the church. Being the curious child that I was I always had questions – one was what do you do. She told me they would pray for the families of the church and the community. It was a practice that began when mothers of the church gathered weekly to pray for the safety of their sons, brothers, and grandsons, members of the community who were serving far away from home during World War II. It's about ensuring that the freedoms we enjoy today are protected for future generations.

Standing here at the Wm. Conrad Veterans Memorial Gardens, we are reminded that each etched name represents not just an individual, but a legacy—a life connected to a family and a community. The veterans we honor today come from different backgrounds, but they share a common bond: the willingness to put their lives on the line for something greater than themselves. And we know that African American veterans, both past and present, have played an essential role in defending the freedoms that define this nation.

To the veterans with us today—and to those who are not able to be here—we thank you for your service and sacrifice. To the families of veterans, especially those with multiple members who have served, we honor your strength and resilience. Your service and sacrifice often go unseen, but today, we recognize and celebrate you.

At Langston University, we take pride in our role in fostering leaders who carry forward the values of loyalty, courage, and service. We are committed to educating the next generation of scholars, many of whom are inspired by the example of their veteran family members. Through your sacrifice, you teach us all what it means to live a life of purpose, honor, and dedication.

In closing, I encourage all of us not to limit our gratitude to just today. Veterans serve every day, and so must we—by ensuring they receive the respect, care, and opportunities they have earned. As a community, let us continue to honor their legacy through our actions, not just our words.

Thank you to every veteran, every military family, and every citizen here today who stands in solidarity with them. We are forever indebted to you. May God bless our veterans, their families, Langston University, Langston, Oklahoma; and the United States of America.

Thank you.