

OPENING STATEMENT

**Robin L. Higgins
Nominee, Under Secretary of Veterans Affairs for Memorial Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
Before the
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
May 16, 2001**

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

I am humbled and grateful for the confidence of President Bush in nominating me to the Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs at the U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs. I hope that I will earn your confidence as well.

In 1988, I was a Marine officer serving in the Pentagon, and my husband, a Marine colonel, was on an overseas assignment with the United Nations in the Middle East.

One morning, he was captured by terrorists in Lebanon, and my life was changed forever. Until a gruesome picture of him hanging appeared in newspapers and TV screens around the world – a year and a half later – I had no idea whether he was dead or alive.

On December 23, 1991, almost 4 years after he was taken, his body was dumped on a Beirut street – on my 41st birthday and what would've been our 14th

wedding anniversary. I buried him later that week in beautiful Quantico National Cemetery just down the road from here.

I know that those who wear and have worn their country's uniform are in a business filled with adversity. The world is still a dangerous place. Fighting wars and keeping peace is the most difficult and demanding of jobs.

Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, Coast Guardsmen, Merchant Mariners – veterans all – understand the duty to country that causes a man or woman to risk his or her life to try to make a difference.

I believe there is a fabric that weaves together people of conscience through the ages and around the world. That fabric is bound with the moral and spiritual lineage of men and women of honor, courage and integrity; those who value something more than their own personal safety. Bound into this fabric are the lives and loves of service members and their families from all times, those who came home, and those who didn't, and those whose fate remains unknown.

George Washington said, "The willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional as to how they perceive the veterans of earlier wars were treated and appreciated by their nation."

That still rings true today.

There is no more sacred trust than that we hold our servicemen and women in the palms of our hand, and bury them on hallowed ground when they lose their personal battles on earth.

I know how important it was to me to find my husband and bring him home, to be buried on American soil with his brothers and sisters in arms.

And ever day that I work to do the right thing for veterans is a day I can show my gratitude for the favor veterans showed me in holding me in the palms of their hand when I needed their support.

Winston Churchill once said, "A nation that does not honor its heroes will soon have no heroes to honor."

If confirmed as Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, I will serve with passion and with care, and will be committed to honoring America's heroes as they deserve to be honored.

I will be glad to take any questions you may have for me.