Giving Thanks

It may not seem like it, given the type of year it has been, but our country has much to be thankful for this season.

This year contained seemingly endless disasters around the globe, from tsunamis that shocked the world, to killer earthquakes and other natural disasters that hit us hard at home. One such disaster was the mother of all hurricanes, which killed and injured thousands, caused untold billions in damages and brought one of our greatest cities to its knees. While the casualties that resulted from Katrina, Rita and Wilma were dramatically less than earlier estimated, thousands of Gulf Coast residents are slowly putting their lives back together or even starting over again with nothing.

At the same time, these events showed how united we are as a nation. While more should have been expected from Washington sooner, it was our cities and citizens of our neighborhoods who were first on the scene. First responders, from firefighters to paramedics to police officers (and even the media), showed their tremendous courage, as they did in 2001, by literally wading into a disaster of unknown proportions, putting themselves in harm’s way and saving lives. I was proud to see L.A.-based firefighters and paramedics saving lives halfway across the country.

I continue to hear many stories that shiver the spine from these brave and dedicated neighbors of ours about the dangers they faced. Wading through knee-deep, and sometimes neck-deep, water, not knowing what was beneath—from hazardous waste to human remains; from broken glass and nails that pierced their protective clothing and exposed them to disease, to open sewers and man-hole covers into which they fell–they demonstrated a spirit of courage that I continue to hear many stories that shiver the spine from these brave and dedicated neighbors of ours about the dangers they faced. Wading through knee-deep, and sometimes neck-deep, water, not knowing what was beneath—from hazardous waste to human remains; from broken glass and nails that pierced their protective clothing and exposed them to disease, to open sewers and man-hole covers into which they fell–they demonstrated a spirit of courage that is unmatched. Cities from across the nation sent some of our finest public servants to aid the needy--with L.A. County being extremely generous in its response. While public employees are often maligned unfairly, their courage and spirit is especially evident in times of disaster.

We are thankful that we can live among these true heroes.

It is clear that Katrina, Rita and Wilma brought billions of economic losses. But assistance to help businesses, from federal and state authorities, to relief funds established by our own association, The American Chamber of Commerce Executives, are helping businesses and chambers of all sizes in all parts of the damaged areas. And what’s more, the fiercely independent small businesses of the region refused to be sunk in a flood of ruin. While jobs were lost, and businesses damaged, they are rebuilding and determined to succeed.

We are thankful for the spirit of American businesses that fuel our economy.

And, finally, we all know that the real price tag of these disasters will never be totaled. But from the first hour, money and supplies poured into charities in all amounts and from all parts of our country. By the time it is over, billions will have been collected. From children who broke their piggy banks or ran a lemonade stand to chip in, to businesses damaged, they are rebuilding and determined to succeed.

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We are thankful for the spirit and generosity of our neighbors.

Fortunately, California has been spared disasters of this nature for some time. The Northridge and Loma Prieta earthquakes were the last major disasters we experienced. But we know that our day will come again. We must prepare and be ready. And on those days, we will be thankful for the spirit of America and all of those who call this great land our home.

Happy Thanksgiving.

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