

Rep. Tom Tangretti
Memorial Day 2000
Remarks

On this Memorial Day we gather once again, as we have in the past, to honor the men and women of this country who gave their lives to preserve the freedoms that we hold so dear and that we have enjoyed for almost two and a quarter centuries.

Today, our nation comes together to honor every one of these men and women -- some famous and well-known, others anonymous except to their families -- but every one a hero.

More than 600,000 have fallen in combat during the 224-year history of our nation.

It is right that we pause to remember them, and in remembering them, honor their selfless sacrifice.

These men and women represented what is best about America on battlefields around the world, with names both familiar and foreign -- Lexington, Gettysburg, Normandy, Vietnam, Somalia.

For many children who know little of war, today is probably nothing more than a day off from school, a chance to enjoy the outdoors and the signal that summer vacation is about to begin.

Indeed, for several days, families from across America have been preparing for their Memorial Day weekend.

I do not think any of the honored dead that we remember today would begrudge this tradition of families getting together to re-establish family ties, spend time with each other, and yes, even enjoying themselves.

But what we must not do, and cannot do, is forget what this day of commemoration is really about.

Originally established after the Civil War to honor the sacrifice and commitment of those who died in that war, it has now become the day when we honor all who have given their lives in defense of this nation.

So, by all means, take some time to relax and enjoy yourself today, but also take some time to remember why we call it Memorial Day, and why you have the time to take off and spend with your family.

On this day, there are lessons to be learned for young people and, indeed, all of us: Remember the sacrifices of those who came before you, and recognize and cherish the gift of freedom that they have given to you.

This day reminds us what we can achieve when we come together as one nation, despite all of our myriad differences -- we can meet any challenge and reach any goal.

It reminds us not just how much we owe those who left home to fight for us and never returned, but also how much we owe those who did come home, and now are our friends and neighbors -- our veterans.

And, it reminds us of the sacrifice of the families of those who did not come home, and of those who have never learned the true fate of their loved ones.

It reminds us to take care of those who have taken care of us in the past, those who care for us today, and those who will take care of us in the future.

Above all, it reminds us of the need for America to remain strong and vigilant in a still uncertain world, so that the future men and women of this nation who wear the uniform will never again have to experience the losses in battle that those who went before them did.

As you leave this place today, ask yourself as an American: "What can I do to honor the sacrifice of those we remember today?"

"What exactly was it that all those brave men and women dedicated their lives to, and ultimately, died for?"

"What can I do to ensure that their legacy continues?"

"How can I best remember and honor their sacrifice?"

For some, these are hard questions to answer, especially today as fewer and fewer parents and teachers can recall a time when our democracy was really at stake and when hundreds and even thousands of young men and women were literally giving their lives to save it.

How can we connect to the younger generations and make them understand the importance of this day, and what it means to their own lives?

Well, there is a very beautiful story about a young Marine named Danny Flynn that I believe offers at least one suggestion.

His story helps to reaffirm our ability to spark in our young people an appreciation of and faith in the perseverance of a free people.

Private First Class Flynn drove a personnel carrier during the war in Vietnam.

He had been in Vietnam for 19 days when he volunteered to take a sick buddy's tour of duty.

On that fateful night, May 25, 1968, a Cambodian rocket killed Flynn.

He was 20 years old.

Flynn was a native of Kings Park, N.Y.

He was buried with full military honors at Pinelawn Cemetery there.

He was awarded the Purple Heart posthumously.

A Kings Park baseball field was named in his honor.

But the most important tribute to Flynn is carried out by a local middle school.

They keep hope alive by teaching young people how important Memorial Day is.

Every year, 5th and 6th graders there are asked to write letters to Flynn's mother.

Through the battlefield death of Danny Flynn, new generations are learning about patriotic values.

Their notes to Flynn's mother are short, but poignant.

"When I say the Pledge of Allegiance, I will remember Danny Flynn," writes one student.

"Bringing books to the Kings Park Library will help me focus on the sacrifice Danny Flynn made for me," reflects another.

The children of that middle school wouldn't understand Memorial Day if someone hadn't taught them that freedom isn't free.

They continue to learn that America's fallen heroes expressed their faith in democracy by committing the most selfless act of all.

In this way and others like it, each of us must continue to instill in young people the importance of Memorial Day.

**We should also ask God -- in our daily prayers -
- to continue to bless America.**

If we do these things, America's faith in freedom, justice and democracy will remain intact.

So, too, will the blanket of freedom that our honored dead bequeathed to us.

History teaches us that our faith in freedom -- readily backed up by our resolve to defend freedom -- has made America, and the world, a better place.

Today, 179 of the world's 193 sovereign states elect their lawmakers.

That means the earth is covered by democracy in greater proportion than water; it's covered by 93 percent democracy.

Clearly, those who made the supreme sacrifice for freedom did so for a victorious cause.

But history teaches us that the world will never run out of threats to that cause.

Hitler is no more and we won the Cold War, but our world must contend with regional despots like Milosevic in Kosovo and Hussein in Iraq.

Countries like China show a growing appreciation for the free market, but at the same time, a disturbing affinity for subjugating their own people and a troubling aspiration for nuclear and strategic supremacy.

Clearly, future generations may be called upon to sacrifice for freedom.

If we teach young people correctly, they will willingly serve in the U.S. armed forces, the defense of freedom will continue and democracy will flourish worldwide.

And, more importantly, they will possess the knowledge of the past that will help them to

avoid the mistakes in this new century that we made in the past one.

May God bless the United States of America and all who stand at the ready to defend her and carry her message of freedom to other parts of the world.

Finally, may we never forget those who already have done so at the greatest price possible, and may we never fail to honor their sacrifice.

Thank you.

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