

Rep. Tom Tangretti

Memorial Day 2001 Remarks

Depending on whom you talk to, this is either the second Memorial Day of the new century, or the first Memorial Day of the new century.

I won't quibble on that point, because whether the new century began last year or this year, this Memorial Day is still an appropriate time to look back on the last century – a truly American century that saw this nation rise to a level of

power, influence and greatness unrivaled in human history.

And, while none of us yet knows what history's ultimate judgment of America in the 20th Century will be, we do know that the previous century was, if nothing else, a great testament to the courage, bravery and heroism of the men and women who serve in our armed forces.

The 20th Century offered many opportunities for the world to fall into darkness and despair – World War I, Hitler, Communism, to name just a few.

Instead, the world begins the 21st Century with as much hope for peace and prosperity for all mankind as it has ever had.

For that, Americans and others around the world will forever be in the debt of the men and women who gave their lives serving in the United States armed forces.

Millions of young men and women have died serving this country in that role, and what a great gift they have given us.

The Democratic experiment they have helped to protect, defend and strengthen is now in its 225th year.

It began with a rag-tag army pitted against the most power^{ful} military force in the world.

It survived a Civil War pitting region against region and brother against brother that almost ripped it apart permanently.

And it survived two world wars and a 50-year Cold War, not to mention civil unrest and political crises.

Yet, with every challenge, our men and women in uniform answered the call bravely, proudly and most of the time, with the weight of the world on their shoulders.

It was the Founding Fathers who first put forth the vision of our democracy – and we honor them with monuments in our nation's capital and around the United States.

But it is our men and women in uniform who have defended and protected that democracy, ensured

**its survival and preserved its role as a beacon for
the rest of the world.**

**We honor them today – average citizens from all
races, creeds and backgrounds who showed
uncommon courage and valor and who made the
most extraordinary sacrifice of all.**

**We are free today, and have survived as a nation,
not because of Washington, Lincoln and Jefferson
-- though their contribution ^{were} ~~was~~ ^{been} important – but
because of the millions of Americans who lived
right next to us or across the street and left their**

**homes and families to give their lives in
preservation of ours.**

**The Bible says that man shows no greater love
than when he lays down his life for his friends.**

**We can show no greater thanks for that gift of
love than by meeting together in public today to
honor, memorialize and celebrate those who gave
that gift – and by using it not to enrich ourselves
but to improve our society and the condition all
those who are our neighbors here, and abroad.**

God gave this nation and the people who live in it the gift of freedom, but he also gave us the responsibility of protecting that gift, and of bestowing it on the rest of the world.

As with any gift or responsibility worth having, it comes with a heavy price. We gather today to remind ourselves of the price that already has been paid by others, and also to renew our acceptance of that price should we be called upon to pay it.

**Those we honor today no doubt expected that,
when the time came, we would be willing to pay
that price.**

**If we truly are, we demonstrate what their
sacrifice means to us more than anything we can
say or do here today.**

**So, pray for those we honor today, and their
families, friends and loved ones. But above all, be
prepared not just to praise and pay tribute to
them, but also to follow their example and make
their sacrifice.**

In closing, I'd like to recall a famous Memorial Day speech given by Oliver Wendell Holmes in 1884.

In his speech, Holmes tries to answer the question that plagues many of us asked to give speeches on Memorial Day, for it is the question that we all are trying to answer: Why is Memorial Day so important?

Why keep this day sacred?

Just two decades after the Civil War, and the beginning of the Memorial Day tradition, Holmes attempted to explain:

"So to the indifferent inquirer who asks why Memorial Day is still kept up we may answer, it celebrates and solemnly reaffirms from year to year a national act of enthusiasm and faith.

"It embodies in the most impressive form our belief that to act with enthusiasm and faith is the condition of acting greatly.

"To fight out a war, you must believe something and want something with all your might.

"So must you do to carry anything else to an end worth reaching.

"More than that, you must be willing to commit yourself to a course, perhaps a long and hard one, without being able to foresee exactly where you will come out.

"All that is required of you is that you should go somewhere as hard as ever you can.

"The rest belongs to fate.

**"One may fall -- at the beginning of the charge or
at the top of the earthworks -- but in no other way
can he reach the rewards of victory.**

**"When it was felt so deeply as it was on both sides
that a man ought to take part in the war unless
some conscientious scruple or strong practical
reason made it impossible, was that feeling simply
the requirement of a local majority that their
neighbors should agree with them?**

"I think not: I think the feeling was right -- in the South as in the North.

"I think that, as life is action and passion, it is required of a man that he should share the passion and action of his time at peril of being judged not to have lived.

"If this be so, the use of this day is obvious. ...

"Although desire cannot be imparted by argument, it can be by contagion.

"Feeling begets feeling, and great feeling begets great feeling.

"We can hardly share the emotions that make this day to us the most sacred day of the year, and embody them in ceremonial pomp, without in some degree imparting them to those who come after us.

"I believe from the bottom of my heart that our memorial halls and statues and tablets, the tattered flags of our regiments gathered in the

Statehouses, are worth more to our young men by way of chastening and inspiration than the monuments of another hundred years of peaceful life could be.

"But even if I am wrong, even if those who come after us are to forget all that we hold dear, and the future is to teach and kindle its children in ways as yet unrevealed, it is enough for us that this day is dear and sacred."

Holmes was right – I believe all of us gather in these places and ceremonies each year not just

because it is important to us to remember and honor those who died in defense of their country, but also because we believe it is important for those who will come after us.

The spirit of America and what it means to the rest of the world – and why its defense and preservation are so important – remains contagious only when it remains public and visible.

That is one of our purposes here today – and a very important one.

Today we honor not just the best of our generations that have already passed away, but also the greatness of our future generations.

Today, whether they are aware of it or not, we instill in them the desire – indeed, the need -- to continue to sound the notes – both in word and ⁱⁿ deed – of America's message of daring, hope and will.

Thank you.