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Memorial Day Remarks
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Before the events of September 11 overtook nearly everything else Americans and the rest of the world were concerned with last year, one of the great pastimes of news organizations, civic groups, pundits, columnists and tavern conversationalists was analyzing the century just past.

Lists of the greatest this or that of the 20th Century were coming out faster than we could absorb them -- list after list after list of what was biggest, most spectacular, or simply the best of the 20th Century.

There were lists of the greatest athletes, the biggest news events, the most important songs, and so forth.

The 20th century was analyzed and dissected, gazed upon and picked over until there were actually lists of the most important lists of the 20th century.

For younger people who spent just a brief portion of their lives in the 20th century, these lists and the hype created over them threatened to make many of the people of the 20th Century mere caricatures; many of the events mere stories.

The two great world wars became black and white pictures on the History Channel.

The Nazi Holocaust and other pogroms became historical mileposts around which to build major Hollywood motion pictures and dramatic morality plays and tragic love stories.

Mankind's greatest inventions became quaint trinkets against which to measure our oh-so-superior technology.

Of course, September 11 was a huge blast of reality on all this fond remembering and wistful storytelling.

Suddenly, war was no longer a black and white social studies lesson; potential mass death could be just around the corner or even in your mailbox; and our great technological inventions suddenly had become means by which to deliver great terror against us.

And of course, for a short time, sports, entertainment and their participants meant little.

Ironically, though, this harsh interruption of our national list-making obsession made at least one of these lists even more relevant, and I believe, cemented in no uncertain terms, the answer of who should be placed at the top of that particular list.

The list I'm speaking of is the list of the greatest people of the 20th century.

I saw some of these lists before September 11.

Some of them had Winston Churchill, the lion at the gates of the British Isles, at the top of this list. Others thought Ghandi, or Benjamin Franklin, or Franklin Roosevelt were more deserving.

The more adventurous list makers chose people like the great mathematician John von Neumann.

TIME Magazine gave the prize to Albert Einstein.

I'll admit, I even got interested in the list-making.

If nothing else, it was fun to ponder and argue about who was the greatest person of the 20th Century.

But where before, the question was trivial,

now I believe that it is perhaps the most relevant and serious question of the day.

Similarly, while before I thought the answer to the question was quite open to debate, I now think that there can be no question about the correct answer.

Indeed, like the answer to most serious questions, I believe the answer to this one is simple, and obvious.

It fact, it is why we are here today.

The answer to the question of who was the greatest person of the 20th Century is inscribed for all of us to see on plaques in almost every courthouse, on memorial statues and markers in thousands of town squares, and on hundreds of thousands of grave stones in cemeteries across this nation, and even on the shores of other nations.

That name is not Ghandi, or Roosevelt, or Einstein.

That name is Anderson, and Smith, and Johnson, and Evans and thousands of others.

It is the name of every young American who long ago, and more recently, sacrificed all that they could sacrifice.

It is the name of every young American who quite literally, gave and gave until there was nothing left to give.

It is the name of every young American who once belonged in this world to mothers and fathers, siblings and friends, spouses and children, but who now belongs to another world, and to history.

I submit to you that these young people, these heroes, were each the Greatest Person of the 20th century.

Can there really be any question of that?

Consider journey of our nation – a nation founded upon the premise as proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence that all people are created equal, and that they all have inalienable rights such as Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.

When we try to place ourselves in history 226 years ago, we cannot help but ask: "What chance did such a nation possibly have to survive?"

Even when viewed through the prism of just the past 100 years, the fact that our nation still exists, let alone still believes in and fights on behalf of its own citizens and others for these rights, is astounding.

This fact offers great hope for the next century, even as we face the events September 11 and all that they portend for us.

Recall that as the United States entered the 20th century, it was still a young nation, and very much a marginal nation.

Little did it know that the 100 years it was about to pass through would be the most barbaric, the most murderous, in the entire wide expanse of recorded human history.

More people were killed by other human beings in the 1900's than in all of the previous centuries combined.

Remember what America saw and battled against during the 1900's – Armenian genocide, Hitler's Holocaust, Stalin's purges, Pol Pot's Cambodia.

Yet somehow, Republican Democracy prevailed against tyrannical dictatorship

Somehow, American civilization enter such century weak and marginalized, and came out the other end alive and engaged, the most power^{ful} nation on earth and the beacon

toward which all civilized people looked for guidance.

How did the great goodness of this nation prevail in the face of such evil?

Again, a simple answer: by virtue of the valor of the single great person whose name is on those plaques, monuments and grave markers.

Take comfort in knowing that that is the same way we will survive this new century that we are now entering, and how we will once again survive and emerge even stronger, and more importantly, with the same values and principles intact that we entered the last century ^{in which} with.

When these simple words expressing my gratitude and reverence for the Greatest Person of the 20th century are finished, I urge each of you to go to a cemetery, a veterans monument, a memorial to the men and women who brought us through that century,

*reflect upon
this incredible -
even if you don't
know them*

and express personally your own gratitude to this person.

Pick out any name.

It doesn't matter which one, they are all heroes, and they are all the greatest.

And when you ^{reflect on that name} stand next to that grave stone, statue, monument or marker, be assured that you will likely never stand closer to the greatest person on earth as you will at that moment.

As Julia Ward Howe expressed it in the Battle Hymn of the Republic: As Christ died to make you holy, this person died to make you free.

Thank you.

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