

MEMORIAL DAY 2004

Good morning.

I'd like to thank you for inviting me to be a part of your Memorial Day observance this year.

As we honor the memory of the more than a half million Americans in uniform who have given their lives for our country, I would like to ask that you join me for a moment of silence, in remembrance of those military men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, both during the months of the actual war and now as we try to stabilize the peace and enable the Iraqi people to freely and peacefully determine their own destiny.

<<Pause for a moment and bow head.>>

For today's men and women in uniform, their mission to defend freedom lives on, strengthened by our eternal memory of American patriots who gave their lives to preserve peace and democracy for future generations.

No words can adequately describe the sacrifice of the men and women we honor here tonight. But there are poignant words, etched on the Army's 2nd Infantry Division Memorial in Burma, that have special meaning this Memorial Day as we now remember those who lost their lives this year in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

The memorial was erected during World War II to honor the many valiant American soldiers who never returned home from the Burmese jungles and fields. Fifty-nine years later, the inscribed words are just as relevant, just as powerful.

The memorial reads: “When you go home, tell them of us, and say – for your tomorrow, we gave our today.”

Think about those simple words – for your tomorrow, we gave our today.

Taking place this Memorial Day Weekend is the largest reunion of WWII veterans. These veterans and their families and friends will be witnessing the dedication of the long overdue WWII Memorial on the mall grounds of the Nation’s Capital. These WWII veterans, who are often referred to as our greatest generation, are to be commended for the historic role that they played in the shaping of our country and the entire world in the 20th century. This beautiful memorial is most befitting to this generation, and I encourage each and every one of you to make a special visit

to this hallowed place of remembrance...coupled with a visit to the Korean and Vietnam Memorials.

Thanks to our noble citizen soldiers, freedom endures today, and it endures for future generations. They defended the future of freedom at places like Bunker Hill and Yorktown, Gettysburg and Antietam, the trenches of France, Guadalcanal and Normandy, the Korean peninsula, Vietnam, Kuwait, Afghanistan and Iraq.

As we gather here today, I cannot help but to be reminded that as we stood here two years ago, we remarked on how different life was before September 11, 2001. And as we stand here, this year's Memorial Day is still different than it was a year ago.

Three years ago, we were living in peaceful times, oblivious to the horror just months into the future.

Three years ago, our servicemen and women entered the military to make our country and their lives better.

And three years ago, local volunteers joined the ranks of our fire departments and emergency services to respond to fires, car accidents and other emergencies. Again, they were oblivious to the types of disasters they would face in just a matter of months.

Three years later, our servicemen and women, those on active duty or in the Reserves, bravely leave their loved ones.

Three years later, our volunteers are being trained for bioterrorism.

Three years later, we have been fully engaged in a war to combat terrorism at home and around the world, and to bring democracy to the people of Iraq.

As we pay homage to our nation's fallen soldiers, let us reaffirm our national commitment of keeping the freedom torch burning for tomorrow. Let us support the American soldiers who are defending freedom as we speak.

In places like Afghanistan and Iraq, our troops are putting their lives on the line to protect our freedom and liberate people from oppressive regimes.

That's why your attendance at this Memorial Day ceremony is important. It sends a clear signal that America stands united behind our Armed Forces, just as we have in the past, just as we will in the future. It says that you care enough about this country to take a moment of remembrance.

To be sure, it's sometimes easy to forget the significance and symbolism of Memorial Day when the All-American traditions of summer are beckoning. After all, who can resist a day off from work, a picnic in the park, a dip in the lake or pool, or hamburgers, hot dogs and apple pie?

But the fact remains that Memorial Day is more than a holiday – it is a day when our nation should express gratitude to the soldiers who give real meaning to the phrase “All-American.”

Sadly, the unprovoked terrorist attack on America on September 11, 2001, was a reminder that we must never take our bountiful blessings or our freedom for granted.

In the years to come, I hope that even more Americans will join us for ceremonies like this. We owe it to our friends, neighbors and loved ones who died defending liberty and justice.

In looking at all of the American flags beside the markers of our brave heroes, I am humbled at their sacrifice.

For more than 200 years, Americans have distinguished themselves on the battlefields for freedom. In places far from American soil, men and women, representing every race, religion and creed of this diverse American melting pot, have willingly donned an American military uniform and defended this country.

And they all knew the risk.

But they did not let their fear of risks overcome their mission. As Adlai Stevenson, former Illinois governor and presidential hopeful, once said, "Men who offer their lives for their country know that patriotism is not the fear of something; it is the love of something."

The Americans we honor today loved the ideals and values upon which this nation was founded. I am proud to say that the vast majority of soldiers of today's military continue to live those values, values like loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity and personal courage.

Today, thousands of U.S. servicemen and women remain in Afghanistan, Iraq, Southwest Asia, Bosnia and more than 120 countries around the world, where the mission to stamp out terrorism and inhumane atrocities continues, supported by the resolve of the American people.

Your support of our military personnel is one of the most powerful weapons in the war against terrorism. In addition to honoring the memory of those who gave their lives for this country, I urge you to reach out to their families, to our living veterans and to the service men and women who continue to defend our freedom.

May the men and women who have made the ultimate sacrifice for our country live forever in our memories. And may we honor them by doing everything we can to protect freedom for future generations, whenever, and wherever, it is threatened.

God bless you and God bless America.

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