AUTHENTICATED
U.S. GOVERNMENT
INFORMATION
GPO

Remarks on the 65th Anniversary of D-Day in Normandy, France

June 6, 2009

Good afternoon. Thank you, President Sarkozy, Prime Minister Brown, Prime Minister Harper, and Prince Charles for being here today. Thank you to our Secretary of Veterans Affairs, General Eric Shinseki, for making the trip out here to join us. Thanks also to Susan Eisenhower, whose grandfather began this mission 65 years ago with a simple charge: "Ok, let's go," and to a World War II veteran who returned home from this war to serve a proud and distinguished career as a United States Senator and a national leader, Bob Dole.

I'm not the first American President to come and mark this anniversary, and I likely will not be the last. This is an event that has long brought to this coast both heads of state and grateful citizens, veterans and their loved ones, the liberated and their liberators. It's been written about and spoken of and depicted in countless books and films and speeches. And long after our time on this Earth has passed, one word will still bring forth the pride and awe of men and women who will never meet the heroes who sit before us: D-Day.

Why is this? Of all the battles in all the wars across the span of human history, why does this day hold such a revered place in our memory? What is it about the struggle that took place on the sands a few short steps from here that brings us back to remember year after year after year? Part of it, I think, is the size of the odds that weighed against success. For three centuries, no invader had ever been able to cross the English Channel into Normandy, and it had never been more difficult than in 1944.

That was the year that Hitler ordered his top field marshal to fortify the Atlantic Wall against a seaborne invasion. From the tip of Norway to southern France, the Nazis lined steep cliffs with machine guns and artillery. Low-lying areas were flooded to block passage. Sharpened poles awaited paratroopers. Mines were laid on the beaches and beneath the water. And by the time of the invasion, half a million Germans waited for the Allies along the coast between Holland and northern France.

At dawn on June 6th, the Allies came. The best chance for victory had been for the British Royal air corps to take out the guns on the cliffs while airborne divisions parachuted behind enemy lines. But all did not go according to plan. Paratroopers landed miles from their mark, while the fog and clouds prevented Allied planes from destroying the guns on the cliffs. So when the ships landed here at Omaha, an unimaginable hell rained down on the men inside. Many never made it out of the boats.

And yet, despite all of this, one by one, the Allied forces made their way to shore, here and at Utah and Juno, Gold and Sword. They were American, British, and Canadian. Soon, the paratroopers found each other and fought their way back. The Rangers scaled the cliffs. And by the end of the day, against all odds, the ground on which we stand was free once more. The sheer improbability of this victory is part of what makes D-Day so memorable. It also arises from the clarity of purpose with which this war was waged.

We live in a world of competing beliefs and claims about what is true. It's a world of varied religions and cultures and forms of government. In such a world, it's all too rare for a struggle to emerge that speaks to something universal about humanity. The Second World War did that. No man who shed blood or lost a brother would say that war is good, but all know that this war

was essential. For what we faced in Nazi totalitarianism was not just a battle of competing interests; it was a competing vision of humanity. Nazi ideology sought to subjugate and humiliate and exterminate. It perpetrated murder on a massive scale, fueled by a hatred of those who were deemed different and therefore inferior. It was evil.

The nations that joined together to defeat Hitler's Reich were not perfect. They had made their share of mistakes, had not always agreed with one another on every issue. But whatever God we prayed to, whatever our differences, we knew that the evil we faced had to be stopped. Citizens of all faiths and of no faith came to believe that we could not remain as bystanders to the savage perpetration of death and destruction. And so we joined and sent our sons to fight and often die so that men and women they never met might know what it is to be free.

In America, it was an endeavor that inspired a nation to action. A President who asked his country to pray on D-Day also asked its citizens to serve and sacrifice to make the invasion possible. On farms and in factories, millions of men and women worked three shifts a day, month after month, year after year. Trucks and tanks came from plants in Michigan and Indiana, New York and Illinois. Bombers and fighter planes rolled off assembly lines in Ohio and Kansas, where my grandmother did her part as an inspector. Shipyards on both coasts produced the largest fleet in history, including the landing craft from New Orleans that eventually made it here to Omaha.

But despite all the years of planning and preparation, despite the inspiration of our leaders, the skill of our generals, the strength of our firepower, and the unyielding support from our home front, the outcome of the entire struggle would ultimately rest on the success of one day in June.

Lyndon Johnson once said that there are certain moments when "history and fate meet at a single time in a single place to shape a turning point in man's unending search for freedom." And D-Day was such a moment. One newspaper noted that "we have come to the hour for which we were born." Had the Allies failed here, Hitler's occupation of this continent might have continued indefinitely. Instead, victory here secured a foothold in France. It opened a path to Berlin. It made possible the achievements that followed the liberation of Europe: the Marshall plan, the NATO alliance, the shared prosperity and security that flowed from each.

It was unknowable then, but so much of the progress that would define the 20th century, on both sides of the Atlantic, came down to a battle for a slice of beach only 6 miles long and 2 miles wide. More particularly, it came down to the men who landed here, those who now rest in this place for eternity and those who are with us here today.

Perhaps more than any other reason, you, the veterans of that landing, are why we still remember what happened on D-Day. You're why we keep coming back. For you remind us that in the end, human destiny is not determined by forces beyond our control. You remind us that our future is not shaped by mere chance or circumstance. Our history has always been the sum total of the choices made and the actions taken by each individual man and woman. It has always been up to us.

You could have done what Hitler believed you would do when you arrived here. In the face of a merciless assault from these cliffs, you could have idled the boats offshore. Amid a barrage of tracer bullets that lit the night sky, you could have stayed in those planes. You could have hid in the hedgerows or waited behind the seawall. You could have done only what was necessary to ensure your own survival.

But that's not what you did. That's not the story you told on D-Day. Your story was written by men like Zane Schlemmer of the 82d Airborne, who parachuted into a dark marsh, far from his objective and his men. Lost and alone, he still managed to fight his way through the gunfire and help liberate the town in which he landed, a town where a street now bears his name.

It's a story written by men like Anthony Ruggiero, an Army Ranger who saw half the men on his landing craft drown when it was hit by shellfire just a thousand yards off this beach. He spent 3 hours in freezing water and was 1 of only 90 Rangers to survive out of the 225 who were sent to scale the cliffs.

And it's a story written by so many who are no longer with us, like Carlton Barrett. Private Barrett was only supposed to serve as a guide for the 1st Infantry Division, but he instead became one of its heroes. After wading ashore in neck-deep water, he returned to the water again and again and again to save his wounded and drowning comrades. And under the heaviest possible enemy fire, he carried them to safety. He carried them in his own arms.

This is the story of the Allied victory. It's the legend of units like Easy Company and the All-American 82d. It's the tale of the British people, whose courage during the Blitz forced Hitler to call off the invasion of England; the Canadians, who came even though they were never attacked; the Russians, who sustained some of the war's heaviest casualties on the Eastern front; and all those French men and women who would rather have died resisting tyranny than lived within its grasp.

It is the memories that have been passed on to so many of us about the service or sacrifice of a friend or relative. For me, it is my grandfather, Stanley Dunham, who arrived on this beach 6 weeks after D-Day and marched across Europe in Patton's army. And it is my great uncle who was part of the first American division to reach and liberate a Nazi concentration camp. His name is Charles Payne, and I'm so proud that he's with us here today.

I know this trip doesn't get any easier as the years pass, but for those of you who make it, there's nothing that could keep you away. One such veteran, a man named Jim Norene, was a member of the 502d Parachute Infantry Division of the 101st Airborne. Last night, after visiting this cemetery for one last time, he passed away in his sleep. Jim was gravely ill when he left his home, and he knew that he might not return. But just as he did 65 years ago, he came anyway. May he now rest in peace with the boys he once bled with, and may his family always find solace in the heroism he showed here.

In the end, Jim Norene came back to Normandy for the same reason we all come back. He came for the reason articulated by Howard Huebner, another former paratrooper who is here with us today. When asked why he made the trip, Howard said, "It's important that we tell our stories. It doesn't have to be something big . . . just a little story about what happened so people don't forget"—so people don't forget.

Friends and veterans, we cannot forget. What we must not forget is that D-Day was a time and a place where the bravery and selflessness of a few was able to change the course of an entire century. At an hour of maximum danger, amid the bleakest of circumstances, men who thought themselves ordinary found within themselves the ability to do something extraordinary. They fought for their moms and sweethearts back home, for the fellow warriors they came to know as brothers. And they fought out of a simple sense of duty, a duty sustained by the same ideals for which their countrymen had once fought and bled for over two centuries.

That is the story of Normandy, but also the story of America, of the Minutemen who gathered on a green in Lexington, of the Union boys from Maine who repelled a charge at Gettysburg, of the men who gave their last full measure of devotion at Inchon and Khe Sanh, of all the young men and women whose valor and goodness still carry forward this legacy of service and sacrifice. It's a story that has never come easy, but one that always gives us hope. For as we face down the hardships and struggles of our time and arrive at that hour for which we were born, we cannot help but draw strength from those moments in history when the best among us were somehow able to swallow their fears and secure a beachhead on an unforgiving shore.

To those men who achieved that victory 65 years ago, we thank you for your service. May God bless you, and may God bless the memory of all those who rest here.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:53 p.m. at the Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial. In his remarks, he referred to President Nicolas Sarkozy of France; Prime Minister Gordon Brown and Prince Charles of the United Kingdom; Prime Minister Stephen Harper of Canada; and Susan Eisenhower, granddaughter of former President Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : D-Day, 65th anniversary in Normandy, France.

Locations: Normandy, France.

Names: Brown, Gordon; Dole, Robert J.; Eisenhower, Susan; Harper, Stephen; Huebner, Howard; Norene, Jim; Payne, Charles; Prince Charles of Wales; Ruggiero, Anthony; Sarkozy, Nicolas; Schlemmer, D. Zane; Shinseki, Eric K.

Subjects: France : D-Day, 65th anniversary; France : President Obama's visits.

DCPD Number: DCPD200900443.