

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2010

Remarks on Memorial Day at Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland

May 31, 2010

Hello, everybody. First of all, I want to just say thank you to Colonel Steve Shepro, who's just done such great work for us and for me over the last several months, several years. I know he's about to be transferred, and I just want to say to him and Helen and Jack how much we appreciate everything that they do.

To Major General Darrell Jones, our commander as—of Air Force District of Washington, as well as Holly and Stuart, and to all of you and all the men, women, and families of the Joint Base at Andrews, good evening. It is wonderful to see all of you on this solemn and special day.

In the life of our Nation, there are few more sacred places than our national cemeteries, around the world, at Arlington, and our national cemeteries across the country. As some of you know, earlier today I was honored to join the Memorial Day ceremony at the Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery in Elwood, Illinois. Unfortunately, some extraordinary storms moved in, and for the safety of all involved, the ceremony was cancelled.

But while the storm was raging outside, I was fortunate to meet with some of the families, friends, and veterans who had come to honor loved ones who had given their lives in service of this Nation. Later, I was privileged to visit with families of our wounded warriors as they battle to recover from the wounds of war. And I wanted to stop by here because I fly in all the time but sometimes don't get a chance to meet so many of you individually, to say thank you for your service, and recognize that long chain of valor and service that you are a part of.

The families that I met with know in their hearts what every American must never forget. At its core, the nobility and the majesty of Memorial Day can be found in the story of ordinary Americans who've become extraordinary for the most simple of reasons: They loved their country so deeply, so profoundly that they were willing to give their lives to keep it safe and free.

In another time, they might have led a life of comfort and ease, but a revolution needed to be won or a Union needed to be preserved or our harbor was bombed or our country was attacked on a clear September morning. So they answered their country's call. They stepped forward. They raised their hand. They took an oath, just as all of you did, and they earned a title that would define them for the rest of their lives, as a soldier, a sailor, an airman, a marine, a coast guardsman.

In the letters that they wrote home, they spoke of the horrors of war and the bravery it summoned, how they endured the slaughter of the trenches and the chaos of beach landings, the bitter cold of a Korean winter or the endless heat of a Vietnam jungle.

Today we can imagine what it must have been like for all those they fought to save when American forces finally came into view. A country was liberated. A Holocaust was over. A town was rid of insurgents. A village was finally free from the terror of violent extremists.

But had you asked any troop—any of those troops in the past, they would have likely told you the same thing: Yes, we fought for freedom; yes, we fought for that flag; but most of all, we fought for each other, to bring our buddies home, to keep our families safe. And that's what they did, to their last breath.

This is what we honor today: the lives they led; the service they rendered; the sacrifice that they made for us. In this time of war, we pay special tribute to the thousands of Americans who have given their lives during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and who have earned their place among the greatest of generations. And though our heart aches in their absence, we find comfort in knowing that their legacy shines bright on the people they loved, America's Gold Star families.

Their legacy lives on in the pride of their parents, like the mother who wrote to me about her son, Specialist Stephan Mace, who gave his life in Afghanistan. She told me, "I just want you to know what kind of hero he was." To all those moms and dads, you instilled in your sons and daughters the values and virtues that led them to service. And to you, every American here, every American around the country owes a debt of profound gratitude.

Their legacy lives on in the love of their spouses, the wives and husbands who gave to our Nation the person they cherished most in the world. To all those spouses, you have sacrificed in ways most Americans can't even begin to imagine, but as you summon the strength to carry on each day, know that you're not alone and that America will always be at your side.

Their legacy lives on in their beautiful children. To all those sons and daughters, we say as one nation: Your moms and dads gave their lives so you could live yours. America will be there for you as well, as you grow into the men and women your parents knew you could be.

Their legacy lives on in those who fought alongside them, our veterans who came home, you, our troops, who are still in harm's way. Just as you keep alive the memory of your fallen friends, America must keep its commitment to you. And that means providing the support to our troops and families when they need it and the health care and benefits that our veterans deserve. This is our sacred trust to all who serve, and the—upholding that trust is a moral obligation.

And finally, on this day of remembrance, I say to every American, the legacy of these fallen soldiers, these fallen heroes lives on in each of us. The security that lets us live in peace, the prosperity that allows us to pursue our dreams, the freedom that we cherish, these were earned by the blood and the sacrifice of patriots who went before. And now it falls on us to preserve that inheritance for all who follow.

They proclaimed our unalienable rights, so let us speak out for the dignity of every human being and the rights that are universal. They saved the Union, so let us never stop working to perfect it. They defeated fascism and laid the foundation for decades of prosperity, so let us renew the sources of American strength and innovation at home. They forged alliances that won a long cold war, so let us build the partnership for a just and lasting peace.

And today, our forces are fighting and dying once more, in faraway lands, to keep our homeland safe. Some of you have come from overseas deployments; some of you are about to go. Let us make sure that all of us are worthy of your sacrifice and of the sacrifices who have fallen. Let us go forward as they do, with the confidence and the resolve, the resilience and the unity that's always defined us as a people and shaped us as a nation and made America a beacon of hope to the world.

So may God bless our fallen heroes. May He comfort their families. May God bless all of you, and may God bless the United States of America. Thank you very much, everybody. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7:28 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to Col. Steven M. Shepro, USAF, installation commander, Andrews Air Force Base, and commander, 316th Wing, and his wife Helen and their son Jonathan "Jack"; and Holly and Stuart Jones, wife and son of Maj. Gen. Darrell D. Jones.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Memorial Day, remarks on at Andrews Air Force Base, MD.

Locations: Andrews Air Force Base, MD.

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