

Administration of Barack Obama, 2012

Remarks at Wreath-Laying Ceremony at the Pentagon Memorial in Arlington, Virginia

September 11, 2012

Secretary Panetta, General Dempsey, members of our Armed Forces, and most importantly, to the families—survivors and loved ones—of those we lost, Michelle and I are humbled to join you again on this solemn anniversary.

Today we remember a day that began like so many others. There were rides to school and commutes to work, early flights and familiar routines, quick hugs and quiet moments. It was a day like this one: a clear blue sky, but a sky that would soon be filled with clouds of smoke and prayers of a nation shaken to its core.

Even now, all these years later, it is easy for those of us who lived through that day to close our eyes and to find ourselves back there—and back here—back when grief crashed over us like an awful wave, when Americans everywhere held each other tight, seeking the reassurance that the world we knew wasn't crumbling under our feet.

Eleven times we have marked another September 11 come and gone. Eleven times, we have paused in remembrance, in reflection, in unity, and in purpose.

This is never an easy day. But it is especially difficult for all of you, the families of nearly 3,000 innocents who lost their lives: your mothers and fathers, your husbands and wives, your sons and your daughters. They were taken from us suddenly and far too soon.

To you and your families, the rest of us cannot begin to imagine the pain you've endured these many years. We will never fully understand how difficult it has been for you to carry on, to summon that strength, and to rebuild your lives.

But no matter how many years pass, no matter how many times we come together on this hallowed ground, know this: that you will never be alone. Your loved ones will never be forgotten. They will endure in the hearts of our Nation, because through their sacrifice, they helped us make the America we are today, an America that has emerged even stronger.

Most of the Americans we lost that day had never considered the possibility that a small band of terrorists halfway around the world could do us such harm. Most had never heard the name Al Qaida. And yet it's because of their sacrifice that we've come together and dealt a crippling blow to the organization that brought evil to our shores. Al Qaida's leadership has been devastated, and Usama bin Laden will never threaten us again. Our country is safer, and our people are resilient.

It's true that the majority of those who died on September 11 had never put on our country's uniform. And yet they inspired more than 5 million Americans—members of the 9/11 generation—to wear that uniform over the last decade. These men and women have done everything that we have asked.

Today, the war in Iraq is over. In Afghanistan, we're training Afghan security forces and forging a partnership with the Afghan people. And by the end of 2014, the longest war in our history will be over. Meanwhile, countless civilians have opened their hearts to our troops, our military families, and our veterans.

Eleven years ago, memorial services were held for Americans of different races and creeds, backgrounds and beliefs. And yet instead of turning us against each other, tragedy has brought us together. I've always said that our fight is with Al Qaida and its affiliates, not with Islam or any other religion. This country was built as a beacon of freedom and tolerance. That's what's made us strong, now and forever.

And finally, when those innocent souls were taken from us, they left behind an unfulfilled work and tasks that remain undone. And that's why, on a day when others sought to bring this country down, we choose to build it up with a National Day of Service and Remembrance.

Scripture tells us, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." There's no better way to honor the best in those who died than by discovering the best in ourselves.

This anniversary allows us to renew our faith that even the darkest night gives way to a brighter dawn. Today we can come here to the Pentagon and touch these names and kneel beside a building where a single stone still bears the scars of that fire. We can visit the field of honor in Pennsylvania and remember the heroes who made it sacred. We can see water cascading into the footprints of the Twin Towers and gaze up at a new tower rising above the New York skyline.

And even though we may never be able to fully lift the burden carried by those left behind, we know that somewhere, a son is growing up with his father's eyes and a daughter has her mother's laugh, living reminders that those who died are with us still.

So as painful as this day is and always will be, it leaves us with a lesson: that no single event can ever destroy who we are. No act of terrorism can ever change what we stand for. Instead, we recommit ourselves to the values that we believe in, holding firmly, without wavering, to the hope that we confess.

That's the commitment that we reaffirm today. And that's why, when the history books are written, the true legacy of 9/11 will not be one of fear or hate or division. It will be a safer world, a stronger nation, and a people more united than ever before.

God bless the memories of those we lost, and God bless these United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:49 a.m. at the Pentagon.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Pentagon Memorial, wreath-laying ceremony in Arlington, VA.

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Names: Dempsey, Martin E.; Obama, Michelle; Panetta, Leon E.

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