

Administration of Barack Obama, 2014

Remarks With King Philippe of Belgium and Prime Minister Elio Di Rupo of Belgium at Flanders Field American Cemetery and Memorial in Waregem, Belgium

March 26, 2014

King Philippe. Mr. President, we are deeply moved to stand here with you amidst the graves of brave American soldiers who gave their lives for our freedom. We remember and honor all those who took part in the First World War and who were killed or maimed and those who, even if they survived, were often scarred forever by their dreadful experience. We will always be grateful for the sacrifice.

The United States of America fought side by side with Belgium and other European nations. As President Woodrow Wilson said: "There is a price which is too great to pay for peace, and that price can be put in one word. One cannot pay the price of self-respect."

For Belgium, this was true when my great-grandfather, King Albert I, led our country in its rejection of the Kaiser's ultimatum and defended Belgium's status of neutrality. The horrors of the trench warfare, including the use of chemical weapons for the first time ever in world history, the deaths of so many soldiers—all this was the acid bath in which many of the old beliefs were dissolved.

The First World War led to many changes in all our countries. Many reforms were introduced in the following years. However, the so-called "war to end all wars" was followed by an even more brutal one, which engulfed most of the world, and which, moreover, saw the heartrending atrocity of the Holocaust.

Our countries have learned the hard way that national sovereignty quickly reaches its limits when confronted with heavily armed adversary who do not respect that sovereignty. Thanks to visionary people, we started on the road of European integration. It was and remains a rocky road, but we are truly convinced that it is the only one. Today, international cooperation, both regional and global, is more than ever necessary to roll back the scourge of war and violence with the tragic wake of human suffering.

This year's ceremonies of remembrance must inspire all peace-loving nations to continue to stand shoulder to shoulder to spread the rule of law, human rights, and respect for each other. This is the best bulwark against war.

I know that the United States and Belgium will continue stand together in this endeavor.

Prime Minister Di Rupo. President Obama, Your Majesty, ladies and gentlemen: We are gathered today to remember, to remember the millions of soldiers and civilians who died during the First World War in Belgium and in the rest of Europe; and here, in Waregem, to especially remember the Americans who lost their lives in our cities in—and our countrysides.

On behalf of Belgium, I will honor their memory and thank them and their families for their terrible sacrifice, a sacrifice that will remain a part of our history and will always have a place in the hearts of the Belgian and American people. We will never forget.

Mr. President, Your Majesty, the ties between Belgium and the United States of America are very strong. I have said this before, and I'm saying it again today in the presence of President Obama: We, the Belgian and American peoples, share and cherish the same values of

freedom, democracy, and progress. We have fought long and hard to obtain them, and we must work hard every day to keep them alive.

These values are our most precious gift to our young people and future generation. Therefore, we have to continue to draw lessons for the terrible war that started 100 years ago. And above all, we have to prevent new conflicts. Those who ignore the past are taking the risk to relive it. Each step to reconcile people is a step away from war. Each step to open up our hearts and minds is a step toward peace.

Mr. President, Your Majesty, ladies and gentlemen, the American sons who fell on our soil are our sons. I promise you, Mr. President, that we will always keep their memory alive. And the same time, we will never forget our Second World War liberators. They, as well, were examples of courage. We are determined to ensure the twin founts of peace, democracy, and human rights. We are determined to ensure the integrity of frontiers and the respect of international law. Here next to these graves, we make a solemn commitment to continue our efforts to promote peace and solidarity amongst people.

Mr. President, Your Majesty, the guns fell silent a long time ago, as did the voices of the fallen soldiers. But their example will always continue to inspire us.

President Obama. Your Majesty King Philippe, Prime Minister Di Rupo: I am honored to be here today. Thank you for welcoming me to this sacred place. To the staff of Flanders Field Cemetery and the people of Belgium, thank you for your devotion, watching over those who rest here and preserving these hallowed grounds for all of us who live in their debt.

As His Majesty and the Prime Minister mentioned, we just spent some quiet moments among the final resting places of young men who fell nearly a century ago. And it is impossible not to be awed by the profound sacrifice they made so that we might stand here today. In this place, we remember the courage of "Brave Little Belgium." Here, we visited the grave of a young Polish immigrant to America who, just a few hours into his very first battle, gave his life for his adopted country. And here, we saw the headstones of two men from Brooklyn, New York, who lay as they fought, side by side.

Here, we also see that no soldier and no nation sacrificed alone. I'm told that this is one of more than 100 cemeteries tucked into the quiet corners of this beautiful countryside. It's estimated that beneath about 50 square miles, there rest hundreds of thousands of men: Belgian and American, French and Canadian, British and Australian, and so many others.

We talked about how many of the Americans who fought on Belgian soil during the Great War did so under the command of His Majesty's great-grandfather, King Albert. And while they didn't always share a common heritage or even a common language, the soldiers who manned the trenches were united by something larger: a willingness to fight and die for the freedom that we enjoy as their heirs.

Long after those guns fell silent, this bond has endured. Belgians and Americans have stood soldier—shoulder to shoulder with our European allies in World War II and through a long cold war, then from Afghanistan to Libya. And today, Belgium is one of our closest partners in the world, a strong and capable ally. And thanks to the extraordinary alliance between our two nations, we know a level of peace and prosperity that those who fought here could scarcely have imagined.

And so before visiting the cemetery, His Majesty, the Prime Minister, and I were able to spend some time together. I was very grateful for the opportunity. And it was a chance to

reaffirm our commitment to keep—as strong as they've ever been—the bonds between our nations, a determination that I know is shared by the American and Belgian people.

Here today I'd also note that the lessons of that war speak to us still. Our nations are part of the international effort to destroy Syria's chemical weapons, the same kinds of weapons that were used to such devastating effect on these very fields. We thought we had banished their use to history, and our efforts send a powerful message that these weapons have no place in a civilized world. This is one of the ways that we can honor those who fell here.

And so this visit, this hallowed ground, reminds us that we must never, ever take our progress for granted. We must commit perennially to peace, which binds us across oceans.

In 1915, a Canadian doctor named John McCrae sat in the back of an ambulance not far from here and wrote a poem about the heavy sacrifice he had seen. They became some of the most cherished and well-known words from that war. And they ended with a plea:

To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high!
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

What is lesser known is that 3 years after he wrote those words—and thousands of miles away—an American schoolteacher named Moina Michael read McCrae's poem. And she was so moved that she wrote a response:

Oh! you who sleep in "Flanders Fields,"
Sleep sweet—to rise anew!
We caught the torch you threw
And holding high, we keep the Faith
With All who died.

Your Majesty, Mr. Prime Minister, thank you again. What I've seen at Flanders Fields will stay with me always. To all who sleep here, we can say we caught the torch, we kept the faith, and Americans and Belgians will always stand together for freedom, for dignity, and for the triumph of the human spirit.

May God bless you. May God bless the memory of all who rest beneath these fields. And may God bless the peoples of both our nations.

NOTE: The President spoke at approximately 11:20 a.m.

Categories: Meetings With Foreign Leaders and International Officials : Belgium, King Philippe; Meetings With Foreign Leaders and International Officials : Belgium, Prime Minister Di Rupo.

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