

Remarks at the Veterans Day Ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery,  
Virginia  
November 11, 1993

Thank you very much, Secretary Brown, General Brady, distinguished leaders of our veterans' organizations, Secretary Aspin and General Shalikashvili and the leaders of our Department of Defense and our military services, and to all of you, my fellow Americans.

Today we gather to honor those who have rendered the highest service any American can offer to this Nation, those who have fought for our freedom and stood sentry over our security. On this hillside of solemn remembrance and at gravesites and in veterans' halls and in proud parades all across America, today we join as one people to appreciate a debt we can never fully repay.

Every American who ever put on this Nation's uniform in war or peace has assumed risks and made sacrifices on our common behalf. Each of the 1.6 million men and women now in our forces today bears our common burden. This day belongs to all of them, to all who have protected our land we love over all the decades and now, over two centuries of our existence. From the minutemen who won our independence to the warriors who turned back aggression in Operation Desert Storm, it belongs to those who fell in battle and those who stood ready to do so, to those who were wounded and those who treated their wounds, to those who returned from the service to friends and families and to the far too many who remain missing.

We honor our veterans on this day because it marks the end of the First World War. On the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month there crept an eerie silence across the battlefields of Europe, and 4 years of unbelievable destruction then came to an end. Today on the 75th anniversary of that Great War, it is fitting for us to recall and salute those from every service who contributed to the allied victory, embodied today by the fine figure of Mr. Coolbaugh who stood here and received this medal.

Our victory in that "war to end all wars" was a great test of whether our Nation then could reach out and become involved in the rest of the world. Many of the soldiers who fought in that war, including the men whom

we honored here today, were born in another century, a time in which America felt secure on this great and vast continent protected by two oceans.

We entered World War I knowing that we could no longer run from the rest of the world. But in the end, while that war proved our strength, it did not prove our wisdom, for within the span of a short generation after it, we neglected during a careless peace what had been so dearly won in a relentless war. We turned our backs on the rest of the world. We ignored new signs of danger. We let our troops and arms fall out of readiness. We neglected opportunities for collective security in our own national interest. We succumbed to the siren's song of protectionism and erected walls against peaceful commerce with other nations. Soon we had a Great Depression, and soon that depression led to aggression and then to another world war, one that would claim a half million American lives.

Now, once more we stand at the end of a great conflict. The cold war is over. The lesson America won in the Second World War led us to contain communism in the cold war and led to the greatest peacetime victory the world has ever known, the collapse of the communist system and the Soviet empire. Our long and twilight struggle against that expansionist adversary has ended. And even as the world marvels at this achievement, once again history is about to take the measure of our wisdom.

Our generation is being asked now to decide whether we will preserve freedom's gains and learn freedom's lessons. We are being asked to decide whether we will maintain the high state of readiness that stood behind our victory or fritter away the seed corn of our security, asked whether we will swell the global tide of freedom by promoting democracy and open world markets or neglect the duty of our leadership and in the process and, in the withdrawal, diminish hope and prosperity not only for our own people but for billions of others throughout the world who look to us.

One of the greatest honors we can pay to our veterans on this Veterans Day is to act with

the sufficient wisdom necessary to preserve the gains they have won through their hard service and great sacrifice. To honor those who served in Europe and Korea and Vietnam and the Persian Gulf, in scores of posts at home and abroad, let us today resolve we will not shrink from the responsibilities necessary to keep our Nation secure and our people prosperous.

We also honor our veterans today by noting the outstanding service being rendered around the world at this moment by the most talented and the best prepared group of men and women who have ever worn our Nation's uniforms. This morning I had the privilege and the honor to host for breakfast not only the leaders of our Nation's veterans' organizations but also 17 of the Army Rangers, Special Operations forces and infantrymen who recently returned from our mission in Somalia. Afterwards, I invited them and their commanders into the Oval Office where we sat and had a visit. I was profoundly impressed by them and by their service.

Not enough of our fellow Americans know the real story of what happened during the terribly difficult firefight in Mogadishu on October 3d, a fight in which they demonstrated great ability, success, and unbelievable valor. During that raid, a Blackhawk helicopter was downed. Despite this setback, the Special Operations forces conducted their raid with precision, apprehending 20 people suspected of involvement in the murder of United Nations peacekeepers in the Somali mission. At that point, they could have pulled back to safety, confident in the success of their mission. After all, what they had come to do was over. But they share an ethic that says they can never leave a fallen comrade behind. So some 90 of them formed a perimeter around the downed aircraft in an attempt to retrieve the wounded and the dead. They found they could not dislodge the body of one pilot, but they refused to leave him behind. They braved hours and hours of the fiercest enemy fire. Eighteen of them ultimately perished; over 70 were wounded. They exacted a terrible toll on their adversaries, casualties 10 times as great, fatalities 20 times as great.

I want to note their presence with us here today. I want to thank them, and I want you to let them know that we know they did their mission well and that we are proud of them. Please stand up. Here they are. Please stand up. [Applause] We owe it to them and to their colleagues to ensure that our forces remain the

best trained, the best equipped, the best prepared in the world. And we will do that. We also owe those who serve in our Nation's military the assurance that what they have done for us will not be forgotten. We owe to our veterans a health care system that is there for them when they need it and provides high quality and compassionate care. We owe to our veterans a measure of the security they have provided to us. And that is why, earlier today, I was proud to sign a bill which helps to increase the retirement benefits of our disabled veterans.

And as we remember all of those whom we see today and those whom we can imagine who are serving for us or who have served, we must never forget those who were never accounted for. That obligation never dies until we know the whole truth. Just this month, we secured an agreement from the Chinese to return the remains of three American aviators whose cargo plane crashed there in the Himalayas in 1943. Our Nation has a particular responsibility to pursue the fate of our missing from the war in Vietnam. On Memorial Day, I pledged here that our Government would declassify and make available virtually all documents related to those who never returned from that war and that I would do it by this day, Veterans Day. I can tell you that last evening, the Secretary of Defense completed that task. That promise has been fulfilled. I know that our Government, our Nation together have a solemn obligation to the families of those who still are missing to do all we can to help them find answers and peace of mind.

Every year, our humble words on Veterans Day can never do justice to the sacrifices made by our veterans, by those who returned and those who did not, by those who live among us today and those who live only in our memories. We know we can never repay the debt, but still we try because we know their sacrifices should be in our hearts every day.

So on this day let us simply repeat to America's veterans what is inscribed on the medals that have been awarded to thousands of those who served in World War I: A grateful nation remembers.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:35 a.m. at a wreath-laying ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknowns.