

Remarks at a Veterans Day Ceremony in Arlington, Virginia November 11, 1997

Thank you very much. Secretary Goyer, members of the Cabinet, members of the Joint Chiefs, General Foley. Commander Hitchcock, thank you for your example and for that magnificent address. Leaders of our veterans services organizations, ex-prisoners of war, Gold Star Wives and Mothers, veterans, members of the Armed Forces, my fellow Americans.

Almost 42 million Americans have served in our Armed Forces over the great history of our country. More than 25 million of them are still with us today. That is a remarkable gift for which we can be grateful, for today we pay tribute to the men and women who offered the highest form of service to America. In a world of constant change and uncertainty, we can know with certainty that today America is free, secure, and prosperous because of the gift of your service.

For different reasons, in different ways, in different wars, and in times when we were not at war, Americans of all backgrounds have donned our Nation's uniform and pledged their lives to maintain our freedom. From Belleau Wood to Normandy, from Iwo Jima to Inchon, from Khe Sanh to Kuwait, all the veterans we honor today gave something to serve. Many gave their lives. Others bear the burden of injury for the rest of their days. Still others made it through with bodies intact but lives changed forever, perhaps none more than our prisoners of war.

In this century alone, more than 142,000 Americans were held in prison camps or interned; 17,000 died during the ordeal. The many ex-POW's here today know better than anyone the precious value of freedom because they have paid the price of losing their freedom. Let us never forget their very special sacrifice. And let us never waver for a moment in our common efforts to make a full accounting for all our MIA's.

As President, you all know I am charged with the performance of many ceremonial duties, but there is not a single one more important than this chance to express the pride and the profound gratitude of all Americans for all you have done. In a wonderful sense, our veterans are

ordinary Americans, but there is nothing ordinary about your patriotism.

Our veterans have won victories for freedom for over 200 years now. And it's worth pointing out, this year especially, that those victories have not all occurred beyond our borders; some have occurred within them, as we remembered twice this fall. First, in Little Rock, in my hometown, where the Army helped to end the integration crisis 40 years ago and remind Americans that what we are pledged to do, and what you have donned the uniform for, is to defend freedom and equality for all. And here in Arlington, with the unveiling of the Women in Military Service for America Memorial, we gave long overdue thanks to the 1.8 million women veterans who have served our country. Both these events reaffirm the powerful truth that we must be, always, one America.

Around the world democracy is on the march. Former adversaries are now our partners. We stand on the cusp of a new century and a new millennium that holds the promise, but, as Commander Hitchcock reminded us, not the guarantee, of an unprecedented peace and prosperity. The benefits the world enjoys today belong in no small measure to America's veterans. To make the promise of peace and prosperity a reality in a new era, America, with its special ability and its special responsibility, must continue to lead for peace and freedom against aggression and tyranny.

At this very moment, our men and women in uniform are doing just that. In the Balkans, after 46 months of the bloodiest, most dehumanizing conflict since World War II in Europe, 23 months of peace forged at Dayton have put Bosnia on the hard path to lasting stability. We have seen steady progress in recent months, elections held, public safety enhanced, the economy gaining strength and creating jobs for people who were desperately poor and unemployed, refugees returned, war criminals brought to justice. All that was possible because our troops and their allies are maintaining a stable and secure environment in Bosnia.

And in the Persian Gulf, our pilots are patrolling the no-fly zones in Iraq, making it clear to Saddam Hussein that another move against

Kuwait or Saudi Arabia would be a big mistake and helping to enforce the international community's sanctions against Iraq. Saddam's efforts to rebuild his weapons of mass destruction and his interference with the United Nations inspectors who are keeping him from doing so are unacceptable.

I want every single American to understand what is at stake here. These inspectors, since 1991, have discovered and destroyed more weapons of mass destruction potential than was destroyed in Iraq in the entire Gulf war. They are doing what they should be doing. They must get back to work, and the international community must demand it.

In meeting today's challenges, we must seize tomorrow's opportunities. Veterans Day, as we all know, began as a tribute to Americans who fought for freedom in Europe in World War I, when we learned that Europe's fate and America's future were joined. Throughout this century, from World War II to the cold war, each time Europe's freedom and security were endangered, America rose to the challenge.

Now we have to have the opportunity to escape this century's cycle of aggression and instability in Europe and to build something that has literally never existed before, an undivided, peaceful, democratic Europe. In July, we in NATO invited Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic to begin the process of joining our alliance. Their entry into NATO and our partnerships with Europe's other new democracies and historic accords with Russia and Ukraine will make America safer, NATO stronger, and Europe more united and stable.

I am gratified that all our leading veterans organizations strongly support enlarging NATO. It is one of the most fitting tributes we can pay to America's veterans because it will help to ensure that the horrors of war in this century are not visited upon Americans in the next century.

It is our solemn obligation to preserve the peace that so many of you in this audience and throughout our country sacrificed so very much to build. And when our Senate considers this question early next year, I hope they will remember the lessons our veterans have taught us, that Europe's security is vital to our own, that allying with Europe's democracy is our best sword and shield, and that it is far, far better to prevent wars than to wage them.

Ladies and gentlemen, we have learned that the world will never be completely safe for democracy, as President Woodrow Wilson hoped for on the eve of our entry into World War I. There will always be threats to our well-being, to the peaceful community of nations to which we belong. Indeed, in the years ahead, we will see more and more threats that cross national borders: terrorism, weapons of mass destruction proliferating around the world, the growth of organized crime and drug trafficking. We will have to find new ways to meet these new security threats.

But let us not forget today that, thanks to the valor of our veterans, the world is safer today from complete destruction than it has been in a long, long time. And let us resolve to maintain the skill and professionalism of today's Armed Forces and to honor those presently in uniform with our support. And it will remain that way.

Thirty-six years ago, on this day, at this place, a President who lies buried in this cemetery spoke to the America people. John Kennedy said, "There is no way to maintain the frontiers of freedom without cost and commitment and risk." So today, let us do more than observe a few moments of silence and just return to ordinary business. Let us truly reflect on the sacrifices made by our veterans to advance freedom and democracy. And let us rededicate ourselves to the hard work done in this country to bring us where we are today, knowing that these gains and future ones will require continued cost, commitment, and risk. And let us never forget those who gave their lives that our Nation might live free, secure, and at peace.

I do believe that the next 50 years can be the brightest chapter in America's rich history and the best time in all of human history if we do our part to honor and follow the example of those whom we honor today.

God bless them and their families, and God bless America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:33 a.m. at Arlington National Cemetery. In his remarks, he referred to Maj. Gen. Robert F. Foley, USA, commander, U.S. Army Military District of Washington; and Wayne Hitchcock, national commander, American Ex-Prisoners of War.