

Remarks at a Memorial Day Ceremony in Arlington, Virginia
May 28, 2012

Thank you very much. Please be seated. Good morning, everybody. Thank you, Secretary Panetta, for your introduction and for your incredible service to our country. To General Dempsey, to Major General Linnington, Kathryn Condon, Chaplain Berry, all of you who are here today—active duty, veterans, family and friends of the fallen—thank you for allowing me the privilege of joining you in this sacred place to commemorate Memorial Day.

These 600 acres are home to Americans from every part of the country who gave their lives in every corner of the globe. When a revolution needed to be waged and a union needed to be saved, they left their homes and took up arms for the sake of an idea. From the jungles of Vietnam to the mountains of Afghanistan, they stepped forward and answered the call. They fought for a home they might never return to; they fought for buddies they would never forget. And while their stories may be separated by hundreds of years and thousands of miles, they rest here, together, side-by-side, row-by-row, because each of them loved this country, and everything it stands for, more than life itself.

Today we come together as Americans to pray, to reflect, and to remember these heroes. But tomorrow this hallowed place will once again belong to a smaller group of visitors who make their way through the gates and across these fields in the heat and in the cold, in the rain and the snow, following a well-worn path to a certain spot and kneeling in front of a familiar headstone.

You are the family and friends of the fallen, the parents and children, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters by birth and by sacrifice. And you too leave a piece of your hearts beneath these trees. You too call this sanctuary home.

Together, your footsteps trace the path of our history. And this Memorial Day, we mark another milestone. For the first time in 9 years, Americans are not fighting and dying in Iraq. We are winding down the war in Afghanistan, and our troops will continue to come home. After a decade under the dark cloud of war, we can see the light of a new day on the horizon.

Especially for those who've lost a loved one, this chapter will remain open long after the guns have fallen silent. Today, with the war in Iraq finally over, it is fitting to pay tribute to the sacrifice that spanned that conflict.

In March of 2003, on the first day of the invasion, one of our helicopters crashed near the Iraqi border with Kuwait. On it were four marines: Major Jay Aubin, Captain Ryan Beaupre, Corporal Brian Kennedy, and Staff Sergeant Kendall Waters-Bey. Together, they became the first American casualties of the Iraq war. Their families and friends barely had time to register the beginning of the conflict before being forced to confront its awesome costs.

Eight years, 7 months, and 25 days later, Army Specialist David Hickman was on patrol in Baghdad. That's when his vehicle struck a roadside bomb. He became the last of nearly 4,500 American patriots to give their lives in Iraq. A month after David's death—the days before the last American troops, including David, were scheduled to come home—I met with the Hickman family at Fort Bragg. Right now the Hickmans are beginning a very difficult journey that so many of your families have traveled before them, a journey that even more families will take in the months and years ahead.

To the families here today, I repeat what I said to the Hickmans: I cannot begin to fully understand your loss. As a father, I cannot begin to imagine what it's like to hear that knock on the door and learn that your worst fears have come true. But as Commander in Chief, I can tell you that sending our troops into harm's way is the most wrenching decision that I have to make. I can promise you, I will never do so unless it's absolutely necessary, and that when we do, we must give our troops a clear mission and the full support of a grateful nation.

And as a country, all of us can and should ask ourselves how we can help you shoulder a burden that nobody should have to bear alone. As we honor your mothers and fathers, your sons and daughters, we have given—who have given their last full measure of devotion to this country, we have to ask ourselves how can we support you and your families and give you some strength?

One thing we can do is remember these heroes as you remember them: not just as a rank or a number or a name on a headstone, but as Americans, often far too young, who were guided by a deep and abiding love for their families, for each other, and for this country.

We can remember Jay Aubin, the pilot, who met his wife on an aircraft carrier, and told his mother before shipping out, "If anything happens to me, just know I'm doing what I love."

We can remember Ryan Beaupre, the former track star, running the leadoff leg, always the first one into action, who quit his job as an accountant and joined the Marines because he wanted to do something more meaningful with his life.

We can remember Brian Kennedy, the rock climber and lacrosse fanatic, who told his father 2 days before his helicopter went down that the marines he served alongside were some of the best men he'd ever dealt with, and they'd be his friends forever.

We can remember Kendall Waters-Bey, a proud father, a proud son of Baltimore, who was described by a fellow servicemember as "a light in a very dark world."

And we can remember David Hickman, a freshman in high school when the war began, a fitness fanatic who half-jokingly called himself "Zeus," a loyal friend with an infectious laugh.

We can remember them. And we can meet our obligations to those who did come home, and their families who are in the midst of a different, but very real battle of their own.

To all our men and women in uniform who are here today, know this: The patriots who rest beneath these hills were fighting for many things—for their families, for their flag—but above all, they were fighting for you. As long as I'm President, we will make sure you and your loved ones receive the benefits you've earned and the respect you deserve. America will be there for you.

And finally, for all of you who carry a special weight on your heart, we can strive to be a nation worthy of your sacrifice, a nation that is fair and equal, peaceful, and free, a nation that weighs the cost of every human life, a nation where all of us meet our obligations to one another and to this country that we love. That's what we can do.

As President, I have no higher honor and no greater responsibility than serving as Commander in Chief of the greatest military the world has ever known. And on days like this, I take pride in the fact that this country has always been home to men and women willing to give of themselves until they had nothing more to give. I take heart in the strength and resolve of those who still serve, both here at home and around the world. And I know that we must always strive to be worthy of your sacrifice.

God bless you. God bless the fallen. God bless our men and women in uniform, and may God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:39 a.m. in the Memorial Amphitheater at Arlington National Cemetery. In his remarks, he referred to Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, USA, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff; Maj. Gen. Michael S. Linnington, USA, commanding general, and Col. Steven L. Berry, USA, command chaplain, Joint Force Headquarters-National Capital Region and Military District of Washington; Kathryn A. Condon, Executive Director, Army National Military Cemeteries; Rhonda Aubin, wife, and Nancy Chamberlain, mother, of Maj. Jay T. Aubin, USMC; and Mark D. Kennedy, father of Cpl. Brian M. Kennedy, USMC.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Memorial Day ceremony in Arlington, VA.

Locations: Arlington, VA.

Names: Aubin, Rhonda; Berry, Steven L.; Chamberlain, Nancy; Condon, Kathryn A.; Dempsey, Martin E.; Kennedy, Mark D.; Linnington, Michael S.; Panetta, Leon E.

Subjects: Afghanistan : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Casualties; Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Deployment; Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Service and dedication; Defense, Department of : Joint Chiefs of Staff; Defense, Department of : Secretary; Holidays and special observances : Memorial Day; Iraq : U.S. military forces :: Casualties; Iraq : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Virginia : Arlington National Cemetery in Arlington; Virginia : President's visits.

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