

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2024

Remarks at a Memorial Day Ceremony in Arlington, Virginia
May 27, 2024

Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you. Please be seated.

One hundred and sixty years ago this month, in the midst of the Civil War, the first American soldier was laid to rest at these hallowed grounds. Private William Christman, a farmworker from Pennsylvania, had enlisted just 7 weeks before. There was no formal ceremony to consecrate this new sanctuary, no fan for—fanfare.

It came at a turning point in the war. As fighting shifted east, the casualties quickly mounted in the bloody, grinding campaign.

Over the next year, William would be joined in death, as he was in life, by his brother-in-arms in this final resting place. And these hills around us would be transformed from a former slave plantation into a national shrine for those American heroes who died for freedom, who died for us.

My fellow Americans, Jill, Vice President Harris, the Second Gentleman Emhoff, Secretary Austin, General Brown; most importantly, the veterans and servicemembers, families, and survivors—we gather at this sacred place at this solemn moment to remember, to honor—honor—the sacrifice of the hundreds of thousands of women and men who've given their lives for this Nation.

Each one, literally, a chain in the link—a link in the chain of honor stretching back to our founding days. Each one bound by common commitment, not to a place, not to a person, not to a President, but to an idea unlike any idea in human history: the idea of the United States of America.

Today we bear witness to the price they paid. Every white stone across these hills, in every military cemetery and churchyard across America: a father, a mother, a son, a daughter, a brother, a sister, a spouse, a neighbor—an American.

To everyone who has lost and loved someone in the service of our country, to everyone with a loved one still missing or unaccounted for, I know how hard it can be. It can reopen that black hole in the middle of your chest, bringing you back to the exact moment you got that phone call, heard that knock on the door, or held the hand when the last breath was taken. I know it hurts. The hurt is still real, still raw.

This week marks 9 years since I lost my son Beau. Our losses are not the same. He didn't perish on the battlefield. He was a cancer victim from a consequence of being in the Army in Iraq for a year next to a burn pit, a major in the U.S. National—Army National Guard, living and working, like too many, besides that toxic burn pit.

And, as it is for so many of you, the pain of his loss is with me every day, as it is with you—still sharp, still clear. But so is the pride I feel in his service, as if I can still hear him saying: "It's my duty, Dad. It's my duty."

Duty. That was the code of—my son lived by and the creed all of you live by, the creed that generations of servicemembers have followed into battle.

On the grounds around us lie fallen heroes from every major conflict in history to defend our independence, to preserve our Union, to defeat fascism; built powerful alliances, forged in fires of two World Wars.

Members of the Greatest Generation, who 80 years ago next week, took to the beaches of Normandy and liberated a continent and literally saved the world. Others who stood against communism in Korea and Vietnam. And not far from here, in Section 60, lie over a thousand—a thousand—7,054 women and men who made the ultimate sacrifice in Afghanistan and Iraq, who signed up to defeat terrorists, protect our homeland after 9/11.

Decade after decade, tour after tour, these warriors fought for our freedom and the freedom of others, because freedom has never been guaranteed. Every generation has to earn it, fight for it, defend it in battle between autocracy and democracy, between the greed of a few and the rights of many. It matters.

Our democracy is more than just a system of government. It's the very soul of America. It's how we've been able to constantly adapt through the centuries. It's why we've always emerged from every challenge stronger than we went in. And it's how we come together as one Nation united.

And just as our fallen heroes have kept the ultimate faith with our country and our democracy, we must keep faith with them.

I've long said we have many obligations as a nation, but we only have one truly sacred obligation: to prepare those we send into battle and to prepare—take care of them and their families when they come home and when they don't.

Since I took office, I've signed over 30 bipartisan laws supporting servicemen, veterans and their families and caregivers, and survivors. Last year, the VA delivered more benefits and processed more claims than ever in our history. And the PACT Act, which I was proud to have signed, has already guaranteed 1 million claims helping veterans exposed to toxic materials during their service—1 million.

For too long, after fighting for our Nation, these veterans had to fight to get the right health care, to get the benefits they had earned. Not anymore.

Our Nation came together to ensure the burden is no longer on them to prove their illness was service related, whether it was Agent Orange or toxic waste, to ensure they protected them—they just have to protect the United States—because it's assumed that their death was a consequence of the exposure.

On this day, we came together again to reflect, to remember, but above all, to recommit to the future they fought for, a future grounded in freedom, democracy, opportunity, and equality—not just for some, but for all.

America is the only country in the world founded on an idea: an idea that all people are created equal and deserve to be treated equally throughout their lives. We've never fully lived up to that, but we've never, ever, ever walked away from it. Every generation, our fallen heroes have brought us closer.

Today, we're not just fortunate heirs of their legacy. We have a responsibility to be the keepers of their mission: that that truest memorial of their lives—the actions we take every day to ensure—that our democracy endures, the very idea of America endures.

Ladies and gentlemen, 160 years ago, the first American soldier was laid to rest on these hallowed grounds. There were no big ceremonies, no big speeches, no family mourn—family members to mourn their loss, just the quiet grief of the rolling green hills surrounding them.

Today we join that grief with gratitude: gratitude to our fallen heroes, gratitude to the families left behind, and gratitude to the brave souls who continue to uphold the flame of liberty all across our country and around the world.

Because of them, all of them, that we stand here today. We will never forget that. We will never, ever, ever stop working for—to make a more perfect Union, which they lived and which they died for.

That was their promise. That's our promise—our promise—today to them. That's our promise always.

God bless the fallen, may God bless their families, and may God protect our troops.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:24 a.m. in the Memorial Amphitheater at Arlington National Cemetery. In his remarks, he referred to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Charles Q. "C.Q." Brown, Jr., USAF.

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

Locations: Arlington, VA.

Names: Austin, Lloyd J., III; Biden, Jill T.; Brown, Charles Q. "C.Q.," Jr.; Emhoff, Douglas C.; Harris, Kamala D.

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