

Remarks at a Memorial Day Ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery in
Arlington, Virginia
May 31, 1993

Thank you very much. General Gordon, distinguished leaders of the armed services, the Defense Department, the Cabinet, the Congress, the leaders of our veterans organizations here, to all the veterans and their families who are here and to all those here who are family members of veterans buried in this cemetery or in any other place around the globe, and to my fellow Americans: We come together this morning, along with our countrymen and women in cities across the land, to honor those who died that we might live in freedom, the only way that Americans can ever truly live. Today we put aside our differences to better reflect on what unites us. The lines so often drawn between and among us, lines of region or race or partisanship, all those lines fall away today as we gaze upon the lines of markers that surround us on these hallowed hills. The lines of difference are freedom's privilege. The lines of these markers are freedom's cost.

Today Americans all across our land draw together in shared experience and shared remembrance. And whether it is an older veteran in Florida, or a teenager in New Mexico, or a mother in Wisconsin, all today will bow their heads and put hand to heart. And without knowing each other, still we will all be joined in spirit, because we are Americans and because we know we are equal shareholders in humanity's most uplifting dream.

Today, as we fly the American flag, some will recall the pledge we began to recite daily as youngsters in grade school, with solemn faith and awkward salute, some of us even before we learned the difference between our right and left hands. Others will remember the flag waving over public gatherings, large and very small. But on this day, in this serene and solemn setting, conscious of the past, conscious, too, of the perils all too present, what we see most vividly in that flag are the faces of American soldiers who gave their lives in battle and the faces of this generation of young service men and women, very, very much alive, still training and preparing for possible conflicts tomorrow. From the first militiaman downed at Lexington to today's rawest recruit, the flag unites them,

soldiers living and dead, and reminds the rest of us that we are all the inheritors of a sacred trust.

It is with that flag and that trust in mind that we resolve this May morning to keep America free, strong, and proud. We resolve in this era of profound change and continuing peril to be ever vigilant against any foe that could endanger us and against any undercurrent that might erode our security, including the economic security that is the ultimate foundation of our Nation's strength. We resolve, as well, always to keep America's Armed Forces the finest in the world. And we resolve that if we ask them to fight in our behalf, we will give them the clear mission, the means, and the support they need to win.

In honoring those who died in the defense of our country, we must never neglect to honor as well our living American veterans. The Nation owes a special debt to the millions of men and women who took up posts at home or abroad to secure our defenses or to fight for our freedom. Because of what they have done for us, their health and well-being must always be a cause for our special concern.

Here by the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, we renew our Nation's solemn pledge also to the POW and MIA families from all wars, a pledge to provide not just the prayers and memorials but also to the extent humanly possible to provide the answers you deserve. And we vow, with the new Korean War Memorial project finally underway, that no future conflict, if conflict there must be, must ever be regarded as a forgotten war. The inscription on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier says that he is, quote, "Known only to God." But that is only partly true. While the soldier's name is known only to God, we know a lot about him. We know he served his country, honored his community, and died for the cause of freedom. And we know that no higher praise can be assigned to any human being than those simple words.

Today we are at peace, but we live in a troubled world. From that flag and from these, our honored dead, we draw strength and inspiration to carry on in our time the tasks of defending

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and preserving freedom that were so nobly fulfilled by all those we come here to honor in this time. In that effort and in the presence of those buried all around us, we ask the support of all Americans in the aid and blessing of God Almighty. Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:30 a.m. at the Memorial Amphitheater. In his remarks, he referred to Maj. Gen. F.A. Gordon, USA, commander of the Military District of Washington.

Remarks at a Memorial Day Ceremony at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial *May 31, 1993*

Thank you very much. General Powell, General McCaffrey, and my good friend Lew Puller, whom I did not know was coming here today, I thank you so much.

To all of you who are shouting, I have heard you. I ask you now to hear me. I have heard you. Some have suggested that it is wrong for me to be here with you today because I did not agree a quarter of a century ago with the decision made to send the young men and women to battle in Vietnam. Well, so much the better. Here we are celebrating America today. Just as war is freedom's cost, disagreement is freedom's privilege, and we honor it here today. But I ask all of you to remember the words that have been said here today. And I ask you at this monument: Can any American be out of place? And can any Commander in Chief be in any other place but here on this day? I think not.

Many volumes have been written about this war and those complicated times. But the message of this memorial is quite simple: These men and women fought for freedom, brought honor to their communities, loved their country, and died for it. They were known to all of us. There's not a person in this crowd today who did not know someone on this wall. Four of my high school classmates are there. Four who shared with me the joys and trials of childhood and did not live to see the three score and ten years the Scripture says we are entitled to.

Let us continue to disagree, if we must, about the war. But let us not let it divide us as a people any longer. No one has come here today to disagree about the heroism of those whom we honor. But the only way we can really honor their memory is to resolve to live and serve today and tomorrow as best we can and to make

America the best that she can be. Surely that is what we owe to all those whose names are etched in this beautiful memorial. As we all resolve to keep the finest military in the world, let us remember some of the lessons that all agree on. If the day should come when our service men and women must again go into combat, let us all resolve they will go with the training, the equipment, the support necessary to win, and most important of all, with a clear mission to win.

Let us do what is necessary to regain control over our destiny as a people here at home, to strengthen our economy and develop the capacities of all of our people, to rebuild our communities and our families where children are raised and character is developed. Let us keep the American dream alive.

Today, let us also renew a pledge to the families whose names are not on this wall because their sons and daughters did not come home. We will do all we can to give you not only the attention you have asked for but the answers you deserve.

Today I have ordered that by Veterans Day we will have declassified all United States Government records related to POW's and MIA's from the Vietnam war, all those records, except for a tiny fraction which could still affect our national security or invade the privacy of their families. As we allow the American public to have access to what our Government knows, we will press harder to find out what other governments know. We are pressing the Vietnamese to provide this accounting not only because it is the central outstanding issue in our relationship with Vietnam but because it is a central commitment made by the American Government to our people, and I intend to keep it.