

MEMORIAL DAY 2000

We Will Remember Them



[Acknowledgment of introduction, distinguished guests, DAV and
Auxiliary officers and members, and others as appropriate.]

MEMORIAL DAY has traditionally been one of America's most solemn and patriotic days. It is a *sacred* day to all of her war veterans.

With love and longing, we gather on this day of remembrance to honor America's patriots who gave what Lincoln called the last full measure of devotion.

Their ultimate sacrifice serves as a constant reminder of the high cost of freedom and the hope for a safer, more peaceful world.

The spirit of Memorial Day was born out of the tragedy and patriotism surrounding the Civil War.

More than 620,000 men and women lost their lives during the bloodiest, most divisive conflict in our history.

Many soldiers were laid to rest in enemy territory, far from loving families who could care for their graves and repair the ravages of nature. Thus, their graves often fell victim to neglect.

It was this profoundly sad and disturbing sight that moved widows of Confederate soldiers in Columbus, Mississippi, to place flowers on the graves of their husbands' former enemies on April 25, 1866.

This compassionate act was one of the first to help lay the foundation for Memorial Day.

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On May 5, 1868, three years after the Civil War ended, Major General John A. Logan, commander-in-chief of an organization of former Union soldiers and sailors, proclaimed May 30th Decoration Day by issuing an order for his posts to decorate graves with the choicest flowers of springtime.

He also urged that, *We should guard their graves with sacred vigilance. Let no neglect, no ravages of time, testify to the present or to the coming generations that we have forgotten, as a people, the cost of a free and undivided republic.*

He wanted American citizens to remember the dead soldiers of the Civil War and the painful glory of their deaths.

General Logan only did by proclamation what men and women on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line had been doing on their own.

Moved by compassion and kindness, they felt the need to remember, to give honor, and express gratitude.

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In 1971, Congress expanded the Memorial Day tradition to include all soldiers who had died in service to the nation, and the last Monday in May was officially designated as **Memorial Day** the day of remembrance we know today.

Even though there is sadness in remembering the dead of our nation's wars, Memorial Day is a celebration of hope that the ideals of *peace, freedom, and prosperity* will shine forever bright in the life of our nation ... and in the lives of her individual people.

I believe that is very fitting. I believe our departed comrades would want us to focus on the hopeful prospects of tomorrow, rather than the dark days of wars long past.

I believe they would want us to use this day to recommit ourselves to the ideals upon which this country was founded.

On this day, and all such days when we pause to remember, there are some essential lessons for the young, and indeed for all our citizens:

Appreciate the blessings of freedom,

Recognize the power and virtue of sacrifice, and

Remember those who gave their lives to strengthen and preserve the invaluable gift of freedom.

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As I think of the dead, I think of the living too. The Disabled American Veterans has long been dedicated to the idea that we honor the dead by serving those who lived ... but returned from military service sick and disabled.

We are proud of what we accomplish for our living veterans through involvement in our organization:

Our National Service Officers secure benefits for nearly a quarter of a million veterans and their families every year.

In this, they have the help of our Hospital Service Coordinators, Department and Chapter Service Officers, and volunteers throughout the organization.

DAV and Auxiliary members annually donate some 2 million hours of volunteer work to patients in VA medical facilities.

They give another million hours to patients in state veterans homes and other facilities.

Last year alone, volunteer drivers logged more than 20 million miles, taking sick and disabled veterans to the VA for medical care.

And there are so many other things we do through our network of DAV Chapters and Auxiliary Units across the land.

This may be a tremendous record, but the DAV is not alone in its commitment to serving our fellow veterans.

The members of other veterans organizations have their stories to tell, and all of this says something important about the extraordinary bond we share.

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Memorial Day is not a day of sorrow, but rather a time for solemn reflection.

Whether at public ceremonies or in a private moment over a loved one's final resting place, Memorial Day offers us an opportunity to think about our country and our way of life.

In the dark hours of war and conflict, America's veterans answered her call, and they're the reason that the United States is the mightiest, most secure nation on earth today.

Remembering is what Memorial Day is all about ... a time to cherish what unites us as one America ... a time to recognize that the mortar holding our society together is mixed with the blood and tears of those who fought and died in battle.

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More than a million Americans men and women have died defending our nation and opposing tyranny on distant shores.

We can never repay the debt we owe them, yet we can strive to glorify their sense of honor, duty and

dedication to the principles and freedoms by which we live.

By observing Memorial Day, we ensure that their memory and spirit did not die with them, whether in a wheat field at Gettysburg, a beachhead in Normandy, a frozen hilltop in Korea, a jungle in Southeast Asia or barren desert sands of the Middle East.

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On this Memorial Day, we must also remember those veterans who returned home physically and emotionally scarred by the horrors of war, horrors that continue to haunt them years and decades after the battles ended.

We have a responsibility to our wartime disabled an obligation that cannot be discharged by the passage of time, or excused by monetary constraints.

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Memorial Day is about many things, but it is mostly about refusing to forget.

In our prayers today, as we honor the memory of America's veterans whose remains consecrate the soil throughout the world, let us resolve to renew our commitment to lead the world toward greater peace, freedom, and prosperity.

And on this special day, we can also show our appreciation for all veterans by demanding that America remember and fulfill its commitment to care for those who have borne the battle.

May God bless the United States and all the American heroes we honor today.

Thank you.