

# National POW/MIA Recognition Ceremony

*Remarks as Delivered by Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen Arlington National Cemetery Friday, September 17, 1999*

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General [Henry] Shelton [Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff], thank you very much for your very moving words. Senator [Max] Cleland; Congressman [Sam] Johnson [Texas], and Congressman [Ronnie] Shows [Mississippi]; Deputy Secretary [John] Hamre; General [James Jones, Commandant of the Marine Corps] and Mrs. Jones; General [Mike] Ryan [Air Force Chief of Staff] and Mrs. Ryan; members of the armed forces, present and past; distinguished guests, including the proud veterans who join us to honor their fallen comrades; family members who have sacrificed so much for America; Janet [Cohen] and Mrs. Shelton; and ladies and gentlemen.

Today, amid these sacred memorials, we are called to bear witness to those who fought for our nation, to answer, in a sense, the same timeless questions once posed by Shakespeare through the character of King Henry VI in a time of great trial to his kingdom. "Where is faith? Where is loyalty?" And if it cannot be found in a steadfast soldier in the twilight of life, "where shall it find harbor in the earth?"

Today, we come to this spiritual place where faith and honor shall always find harbor from the vagaries of age to honor the virtue and the valor of fellow Americans who were once held as captives, those whose perseverance and courage prevailed over the pain and doubt of war's hellish prisons, and to offer our prayers of deliverance for those still missing, to renew and replenish our well of faith for those who have served our nation and who endure in our hearts yet beyond our reach.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are the heirs of freedom paid for with the blood of patriots. So in this brilliant light of their precious legacy, we come here with hearts that are humble, not only dedicated to the noble goal of preserving a nation at peace, but to that of restoring peace of mind to those who still struggle with a grief borne of uncertainty. And so to the families and friends of those still missing, we renew our oath: without rest or reservation we will strive to account for every warrior who has fought to preserve the freedoms that we cherish and enjoy this day.

And it was this abiding commitment that brought us back to this sacred place last year. With reluctance -- with great reluctance -- we disturbed this hallowed ground to recover the remains which until that time were "known but to God." Science helped ease the sorrow and suffering of a family and return their son to his rightful place, and science may one day help to ease the weight of grief of those who wait and wonder. But science cannot succeed without faith and without dedication.

And this ceremony is held in that spirit. The words that now grace the Vietnam tomb — "Honoring and Keeping Faith with America's Missing Servicemen" — they are carved in stone. Their permanence—like our remembrance of America's fallen soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines—will be a measure of this nation's profound reverence and respect. And those words will always remain, eloquent in the clarity of their purpose, enduring by the dignity of their provenance. And so if anyone should ever ask, "Where is faith? Where is loyalty?", the answer shall be: "Here, in the harbor of our hearts, enduring forever."

Ladies and gentlemen, we are truly honored today by a veteran whose life has been marked by great suffering and great success as well. In one tragic instant, more than 30 years ago in Vietnam, a grenade took away most of his limbs, and nearly his life. But from that crushing moment, he resolved to make his life an odyssey: a journey that not only carried him beyond the unimaginable pain of physical recovery, but to larger victories that few would have imagined possible.

Max Cleland has served this nation as a soldier, as the youngest administrator ever of the Veterans

Administration, and now as a United States senator. And he has written a powerful and a very poignant autobiography, and virtually every page is a study in the values of faith and loyalty that we honor here today. His final words on the final page of that book, they hold profound and lasting meaning for our extended family: the servicemen and women, the veterans, the POWs, the friends and families of those still missing in action, all those who struggle to survive and to persevere, to keep their faith and to heal body and spirit.

He wrote that, "I have learned that ultimate strength comes from letting go, and letting God have His way with my life. And when I fall—when I get broken by life—by seeking Him again, I can become even stronger than I was before. Through my crises and defeats I have learned that it is possible to become strong at the broken places."

Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome a true friend of our veterans and our armed forces. He is an inspiration to millions of Americans. He is a profound example of faith and loyalty to our nation. He's a strong, he's an unbroken man: Max Cleland.