

THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

November 11, 1999

REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
AT VETERANS DAY MEMORIAL SERVICE
Arlington National Cemetery
Arlington, Virginia

11:50 A.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you very much, Secretary West, for your eloquent remarks and your leadership and your many years of devotion to our country. Commander Smart, thank you for your leadership this year. Chaplain Cook, Lee Thornton, thank you for always being here for our veterans.

The leaders of our veterans' organizations, members of Congress here; Deputy Secretary Guber and members of the Cabinet; General Ross and members of the Joint Chiefs; General Davis and other Medal of Honor recipients. To the former POWs, the families of those still missing in action; to our veterans and their families.

Let me begin by offering a special word of appreciation to the Army Band and Chorus for their magnificent music today and for making us feel so important. (Applause.) And I want to say a special welcome today to a person you may have read about in the morning papers -- Captain Earl Fox is the Senior Medical Officer at the Coast Guard Personnel Command here in Washington. He also happens to be the last World War II veteran still on active military duty. (Applause.)

Now, next week he will retire at the tender young age of 80. I think he has earned his retirement. But, Captain, on behalf of a grateful nation, we say thank you for your service. Thank you. (Applause.)

My fellow Americans, as we all know, we celebrate Veterans Day on the anniversary of the Armistice ending World War I, on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month. Eighty years ago today, President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed this a day of solemn pride in the heroism of those who died in the country's service.

For two full minutes in the middle of that day, all traffic in business across our nation stopped, as Americans took time to remember family and friends who fought and those who never came home from the war to end all wars. I don't believe those men and women who were our forebears could ever have imagined that so many other times in this century young Americans would be asked again and again to fight and die for freedom in foreign lands.

When the 20th century began, the headstones that stand in silent formation on these beautiful hills covered fewer than 200 acres. Today, at century's end, they cover more than 600 acres. Hundreds of millions of people in the United States and around the world sleep in peace because more than a million Americans rest in peace. Here, and in graves, marked and unmarked, all across the world. Today we come again to say owe them a debt we can never repay.

In a way, the young men and women who have died in defense of our country gave up not only the life they were living, but also the life they would have lived -- their chance to be parents; their chance to grow old with their grandchildren. Too often when we speak of sacrifice, we speak in generalities about the larger sweep of history, and the sum total of our nation's experience. But it is very important to remember that every single veteran's life we honor today was just that -- a life -- just like yours and mine. A life with family and friends, and love and hopes and dreams, and ups and downs; a life that should have been able to play its full course.

Fifty-seven years ago this week, the eyes of America were focused on a small, sweltering island in the South Pacific. Pearl Harbor had been bombed the year before, and Japanese forces in the Pacific were capturing one island after another. The task of stopping them fell to a group of young Marines in an operation called Project Watchtower, in a place called Guadalcanal.

The battle was expected to last six weeks. It took six months. The jungle was so thick soldiers could hardly walk; fighting so fierce and rations so thin that the average Marine lost 25 pounds. Every night shells fell from the sky and enemy soldiers charged up the hills. The only weapons Marines had to defend themselves were Springfield rifles left over from World War I. But with the strength forged in factories and fields back home, they turned back wave after wave of hand-to-hand fighting, until, at last, the Navy was able to help the Marines turn the tide in the naval battle that began 57 years ago tomorrow.

That turned the tide of battle in the whole Pacific, and with it, the tide of American history. On that small island, in the Battle of Guadalcanal, Americans proved that our nation would never again be an island, but, rather allied with freedom and peace-loving people everywhere, as the greatest force for peace and freedom the world has ever known.

In the days and years that have followed, men and women, forged from the same mettle, in every branch of our military have built on those sacrifices and stood for the cause of freedom, from World War II to Korea to Vietnam to Kuwait City to Kosovo.

On the beach at Guadalcanal is a monument to those who fought on the island. In the hills that surround us, some of the 1,500 Marines and sailors who lost their lives in that battle are laid to rest. They are some of the greatest of the greatest generation.

One of those who served at Guadalcanal was a 19-year-old Marine lieutenant named John Chafee. He went on to fight in Okinawa, to lead troops in Korea, to serve as governor of Rhode Island and Secretary of the Navy, and then, for more than 20 years, as a United States senator. He helped write the law that keeps our air clean. His fights for health care helped millions of veterans live better lives. Yet he was so humble that when he received a distinguished award from the Marine Corps Foundation last year, he hardly spoke about his wartime service.

Two weeks ago, this remarkable man passed away at the age of 77. At his funeral, Hillary and I spent time with his five children and his 12 grandchildren. And I was proud to announce on that day that the Navy will be naming one of its most modern and capable destroyers after John Chafee. (Applause.)

Now, that was the measure of one man's life who fought in Guadalcanal and survived. Today, in our imaginations, we must try to imagine the measure of all the lives that might have been, had they not been laid down in service to our nation. What about the more than 1 million men and women who have given their lives so that we could be free? What would have been the measure of their lives? What else would they have accomplished for their families and their country, if only they had had the chance?

Of course, we don't have any of those answers. But because we have the question, we clearly have a responsibility to stand in the breach for them. We are not just the beneficiaries of their bravery. We are the stewards of their sacrifice. Thanks to their valor, today, for the very first time in all of human history, more than half of the nations of the world live under governments of their own choosing. Our prosperity and power are greater than they have ever been. It is, therefore, our solemn obligation to preserve the peace and to make the most of this moment for our children and the children of the world, so that those who sacrificed so much to bring us to this moment will be redeemed in the lives they could have lived by the lives that we do live.

How shall we do this? It means at least that we must continue to be the world's leading force for peace and freedom, against terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. It means we must keep the commitment I have had since the moment I took the oath of office, that our men and women in uniform will remain the best-trained, best-equipped, best-prepared in the world.

In Kosovo, we had zero combat fatalities, and only two planes shot down, though our pilots took heavy enemy fire every single day and put their lives repeatedly at greater risks to avoid hitting civilians on the ground. That is a tribute to the professionalism we see every day from our military forces all around the world. (Applause.)

Last month I was proud to sign a bill that will keep us moving in that direction, with the start of the first sustained increase in military spending in a decade and the biggest pay increase for our troops in a generation. (Applause.)

It means we must also do more to be faithful to our veterans when their service is over. President Theodore Roosevelt once said, anyone good enough to shed his blood for his country is good enough to be given

a square deal afterward.

Over the past seven years we have opened more than 600 veterans' out-patient clinics across America. This year we expect to treat 400,000 more veterans than last year, including more disabled veterans than ever before. We will continue to make sure that all veterans receive the care they deserve. And we must continue to make a special effort to end something that must be intolerable to all of us -- the tragedy of homeless veterans.

I want to commend the reigning Miss America, Heather Renee French, who is with us today, along with her family, her father -- a disabled Vietnam veteran -- her mother, her brother, and her sister, for all the work she is doing in her position finally to bring proper national attention to the plight of homeless veterans. We thank you for what you're doing. Thank you. (Applause.) We must not rest until we have done everything we possibly can to bring them back into the society they so willingly defended.

And we must bear in mind the special sacrifice of the more than 140,000 veterans who were held in prison camps or interned during this century. I want to commend the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund for completing a project they launched a year ago today to create a special curriculum on the Vietnam War, and send a copy to every single high school across America. Part of that curriculum focuses on the men and women who never came home. We must not forget them. (Applause.)

I am very proud to announce today that we have successfully recovered the remains of three more United States servicemen lost during the Korean War. They're coming home tonight. (Applause.) But we must not waver in our common efforts to make the fullest possible accounting for all our MIAs, for all their families to have their questions answered. (Applause.)

Finally, fulfilling our responsibility to lead for peace and freedom, and to be faithful not only to our service personnel, but our veterans, requires us to do more than prepare people to fight wars and take care of them when they come home. We must work with greater determination to prevent wars. Every American who gave his or her life for our country was, in one way or another, a victim of a peace that faltered, of diplomacy that failed, of the absence of adequate preventive strength. We know that if diplomacy is not backed by real and credible threats of force, it can be empty, and even dangerous. But if we don't use diplomacy first, then our military will become our only line of defense.

Of course, it also costs money to help struggling young democracies to stand on their feet as friends and partners of the United States, as we've tried to do from Poland to Russia to Nigeria to Indonesia. It costs money to make sure nuclear weapons in the former Soviet Union are secure; for the terrorists and leaders who wish us harm do not acquire the means to kill on a more massive scale. It costs money to support the peacemakers in places like the Middle East and the Balkans and Africa, so that regional conflicts do not explode and spread.

But all of you know, better than most, that freedom is not free. And all of you know, far better than most, that the costliest peace is far cheaper than the cheapest war. (Applause.)

I am pleased to report to you today that the Democrats and Republicans in Congress are working together on a strong compromise that will allow us to meet some of our most urgent needs in foreign affairs, to prevent wars. We're not finished yet, but there is a bipartisan center like that which has carried America for 50 years at this hopeful moment now at work in the Congress. I am grateful for it, and our children will be safer for it.

In less than two months, we'll be able to say the conflict and bloodshed that took so many American lives came from another century. So we gather today for the last time in this century to dedicate ourselves to being good stewards of the sacrifice of the veterans of our country. (Applause.)

As we look ahead to the large challenges and the grand opportunities of the new century and a new millennium, when our country has more prosperity than ever before, and for the first time in my lifetime has the ability to meet those challenges and to dream dreams and live them because we are unthreatened by serious crises at home and security threats abroad, let us resolve to honor those veterans, to redeem their sacrifice, to be stewards of the lives they never got to live by doing all we can to see that the horrors of the 20th century's wars are not visited upon 21st century Americans. That is the true way to honor the people we come here today to thank God for.

Thank you very much, and God bless America. (Applause.)

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12:08 P.M. EST