

President Honors American Veterans

By Paul Stone
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ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY, Va., November 13, 1997 -- It was both a tribute and a warning. It was both a declaration of national pride and a call for international commitment. And it was a promise for a better tomorrow.

President Clinton used his annual Veterans Day speech to honor more than 42 million Americans who have served in the armed forces. He also touched on the issues affecting today's service members, including NATO, Bosnia and the continuing crisis in Iraq.

Clinton warned Iraqi President Saddam Hussein that continued interference with U.N. weapons inspectors, or moves against Kuwait or Saudi Arabia, "would be a big mistake."

"I want every American to understand what is at stake here," Clinton said. "These inspectors, since 1991, have discovered and destroyed more weapons of mass destruction potential than was destroyed in Iraq in the entire Gulf War. They are doing what they should be doing. They must get back to work, and the international community must demand it."

Under a cool, overcast sky, Clinton praised today's service members, especially those serving in the Balkans, and said U.S. and allied efforts there have helped put Bosnia on the path to a lasting peace.

"We have seen steady progress there in recent months: elections held, public safety enhanced, the economy gaining strength and creating jobs for people who were desperately poor and unemployed, refugees returned, war criminals brought to justice," Clinton reminded the crowd. "All that was possible because our troops and their allies are maintaining a stable and secure environment in Bosnia."

He said efforts in Bosnia, combined with NATO expansion to include Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, will help produce a stronger, more unified and stable Europe. He thanked veterans organizations for their support of NATO expansion and urged the Senate to consider the sacrifices of veterans when it considers expansion early next year.

"I hope they will remember the lessons our veterans have taught us: that Europe's security is vital to our own, that allying with Europe's democracy is our best sword and shield and that it is far, far better to prevent wars than to wage them," Clinton said.

Although touching on the contemporary issues affecting today's service members, it was to veterans of past conflicts to whom Clinton addressed most of his comments. Amidst the solemnity and serenity of the graves that decorate the cemetery's rolling hills, he reminded the crowd of the enormous sacrifices made by veterans throughout U.S. history.

"From Belleau Wood to Normandy, from Iwo Jima to Inchon, from Khe Sanh to Kuwait, all the veterans we honor today gave something to serve," he said. "Many gave their lives. Others bear the burden of injury for the rest of their days. Still others make it through with bodies intact but lives changed forever, perhaps none more than our prisoners of war.

"In this century alone, more than 142,000 Americans were held in prison camps or interned. Seventeen thousand died during the ordeal. The many ex-POWs here today know better than anyone the precious value of freedom, because they have paid the price of losing their freedom. Let us never forget their very special sacrifice. And let us never waver for a moment in our common efforts to make a full accounting for all our MIAs."

In a ceremony that included a wreath laying at the Tomb of the Unknowns, Clinton also paid special tribute to women veterans. He called events surrounding the recent opening of the Women in Military Service for America Memorial "long overdue thanks" to the 1.8 million women veterans who have served the United States.

While thanking and congratulating veterans for their service and sacrifices, he also warned of the challenges that have emerged since the end of the Cold War.

"In the years ahead, we will see more and more threats that cross national borders: terrorism, weapons of mass destruction proliferating around the world, the growth of organized crime and drug trafficking," he said. "We will have to find new ways to meet these new security threats."