

President, nation pause in honor of veterans

by Bradley A. Rhen

ARLINGTON, Va. (Army News Service, Nov. 16, 1999) -- A cool breeze whipped around the Tomb of the Unknowns in Arlington National Cemetery Nov. 11 as the bell tolled 11 a.m., marking the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month. President Bill Clinton then laid a wreath at that solemn shrine and paused, as did those who stood watching nearby, in remembrance of those who served the nation on Veteran's Day.

Afterward, in a speech at the cemetery's Memorial Amphitheater, Clinton said the nation owes its veterans a debt it can never truly repay.

He said the men and women who have died in defense of the nation gave not only the life they were living, but also the life they would have lived -- they never had the chance to be parents or 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," Clinton said. "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."

According to the program distributed at the ceremony, over 41 million Americans participated in America's wars dating back to the American Revolution in 1775. Over 1 million Americans died in service, and there are currently over 24 million living veterans.

"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," Clinton said. "What about the more than one 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?"

Clinton said he was proud to have signed a bill that will finance the first sustained increase in military spending in a decade and the biggest pay increase for service members in a generation.

"It means we must also do more to be faithful to our veterans when their service is over," he said. "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."

The program in the cemetery was hosted by the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, represented by its commander in chief, John W. Smart. The ceremony also included remarks from Secretary of Veterans Affairs Togo D. West Jr.

Smart, himself a Vietnam veteran, said America must recognize that although we live in relative peace today, the cost of war continues, long after the guns have been silenced.

"Many veterans bear their disabilities and scars of military service and the lives of the families and loved ones of our missing bear a lasting sense of loss," Smart said. "Today, let us all -- this administration, Congress and the American people -- renew our commitment to protect and to preserve the promises made to our veterans, their spouses, their widows and their children."

West, who was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Field Artillery Corps upon college graduation in 1965, throughout America's history, the nation has always turned to its veterans in times of crisis and they have always responded, never resting until war was over and all things were righted.

"We salute those who have served and returned to live among us as veterans and fellow lovers of this nation," West said. "We honor the sacrifice of those who served and perished and we reflect upon the hardships visited upon their families."

West also said the nation, which has benefited so greatly from the fidelity, courage and dedication of its veterans, has one obligation to those veterans: to learn.

"Every year we learn anew the lessons our veterans have taught us," West said. "We learn that the purest definition of veteran is one who has served wherever his nation has asked. To do whatever her nation has needed, simply because our nation has asked and our nation has needed. We learn the profound truth that even as life is God's gift to each one of us, every day in the life of this nation is the gift of our veterans to all of us."

Clinton announced that the remains of three more servicemen lost during the Korean War were successfully recovered and were returning home that night.

"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," Clinton said.

In closing, Clinton said America has more prosperity in the new millennium because it is 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," he said, "by doing all we can to see that the horrors of the 20th century's wars are not visited upon 21st century Americans."

(Editor's note: Spc. Bradley Rhem is assistant editor of the Pentagram)