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"The Blessings and Burdens of Liberty": Keynote Address, Memorial Day Program, St. Cloud VA Medical Center, May 25, 2009

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“The Blessings and Burdens of Liberty”



Keynote Address
Memorial Day Program
St. Cloud VA Medical Center
May 25, 2009

Thank you for the opportunity to address you this morning. As you understand from my biography, I have a somewhat unique distinction of being in the military, actually teaching Military History, and having experienced historically significant events firsthand. In my current assignment as Professor of Military Science, I am responsible for training and developing the next generation of the Army's leaders. Whenever I can, I cite the memory of those who have served and sacrificed so that we may stay free.

It is fitting that we set aside time to remember as Americans have formally done since 1868 when the Civil War Veterans' organization, the Grand Army of the Republic, placed flowers on the graves of Union and Confederate dead at Arlington National Cemetery. Today, we place flags on the graves of veterans, families will place flowers, we hold parades, we wear poppies, we fly our flags, Boy and Girl Scouts place candles on civil war graves in Virginia, we hear speeches ... hopefully good ones.

My comments echo a theme of remarks I regularly make to connect to that past sacrifice; to remember the blessings and burdens of Liberty that make that bond of memory worthwhile and necessary.

Blessings

Do we need to remember the blessings of Liberty? *Yes*. I sometimes wonder if we, myself included, forget or have forgotten how special our country is, how great Liberty is! It might be like telling a bodybuilder that they have big muscles ... they are so used to this fact, take it so for granted, that they hardly even notice anymore. Now some might tell us that the discussion of how unique and wonderful our country is has gone out of fashion. I am concerned when I hear that grade school and high school students are no longer required to take classes in civics, government, and American history. I am concerned that our youth are not learning about Liberty. I am concerned when I hear that people want to apologize for our country. Why am I concerned? Because these trends suggest that we have forgotten that sacred blessing of Liberty and forgetting Liberty would be like that bodybuilder forgetting to work out: we can get weak very quickly.

To combat this weakness, I need to start today with a recounting of those blessings of Liberty. Liberty is one of those inalienable rights that were the basis of our Founders' decision to declare independence, but what is it? Let's go back to the basics: Have you ever checked the dictionary definition? Merriam Webster Online says that liberty is:

l: the quality or state of being free: **a**: the power to do as one pleases **b**: freedom from physical restraint **c**: freedom from arbitrary or despotic control **d**: the positive enjoyment of various social, political, or economic rights and privileges **e**: the power of choice

Liberty, the freedom to be and do, to develop our humanity as long as we do not harm others is a concept well articulated by past leaders. Thomas Jefferson in 1819 defined Liberty as "unobstructed action according to our will within limits drawn around us by the equal rights of others." Abraham Lincoln expressed Liberty in the Gettysburg Address as government of the people, by the people, and for the people ... Liberty, as outlined by Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his State of the Union address in January 1941, only a few months before our nation entered World War II, is the Four Freedoms: Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Worship, Freedom from Want, and Freedom from Fear.

What has Liberty meant to us and our ancestors since those who declared our independence first stated it a right? It has meant incredible opportunity, incredible wealth, incredible challenges, amazing growth. What have people done to get it — they have braved all and risked everything. Why did they come to this country?

Some came to escape government dominating their lives. They fled the forced military service of young men by governments like Imperial Russia where parents would hold symbolic funerals for sons when they left for the army because they would prob-

ably never see their child alive again. Others came to worship as they chose, like we know not only from the journey of the *Mayflower* but many other faiths as well. Some came to end the feudal privileges taken on them like you may have seen in the film *Braveheart*. They came to get away from economic oppression of landlords who took the best of the harvest. Granted, some may have been kidnapped and shipped here as slaves or indentured servants, but it was here that they learned of Liberty and here that they helped us move closer to the ideal through the crucibles of the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement.

The desire for Liberty motivated still other people to get in boats, risk their lives, and flee places like Cuba or Vietnam. It drove people to break through the Iron Curtain or stand against tanks or accept imprisonment. It moved many of our ancestors to leave everything they owned, which often wasn't much, to come to America with little more than the clothes on their back.

And what do we enjoy under this Liberty? We certainly have freedom of speech: where else would the President — the most powerful person in the world — be called the names he is called? We have freedom of worship: look at the churches, synagogues, temples, shrines, and mosques that dot our land. We have freedom from want when even our poorest today enjoy a better material life than the richest did in the not-so-distant past. We have freedom from fear when we can go to bed not having to worry that at any time some agent of the state might come to take us away in the dead of night.

We have a land where you can do just about anything and be just about anyone you desire if you are willing to work and accept responsibility. We still have a land where each of us is truly only limited by the content of our character and the strength of our Spirit where we do not need to be guaranteed happiness, only the freedom to pursue it.

Is it perfect? No. We have always known what Liberty was; it has just been hard to achieve it. We are still moving toward that more perfect union desired in the Constitution.

Are there violations of these ideals of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness? Yes, sadly, they still exist, in ways big and small. But in the eleven score and thirteen years since our founding fathers brought forth this new nation, we have remained dedicated to that principle that all are created equal and we have learned what that means and still are learning as we move forward. Show me another country and constitution and government with the same record, the same drive toward Liberty, the same dedication to providing freedom for all its citizens. Is it worth defending? *Yes!* I will venture that it is safe to say that all of you think so too, and so have others before us ... but there is a cost for this Freedom, there is a burden for the blessings of Liberty.

Burden

What makes up that burden? One of the greatest burdens is the sacrifice of military service and the hardship on our service members defending the Republic. It is the regimentation of barracks life, the lack of sleep standing watch, the heat of the desert while on patrol, the guilt of missing yet another family event, the weight of command, the loss of one of those you lead, and too often this burden includes wounding of the mind or body ... and death.

You see examples of this burden in that thousand-yard stare of the veteran who's been on the line too long. You understand the burden when you know that General Eisenhower was smoking over three packs of cigarettes per day by 1944. Have you seen the before and after photos and the creases that formed on the face of President Lincoln or have you noticed the gray hair that formed on the heads of Presidents Clinton and Bush during their terms? See a movie like *12 o'Clock High* or the *Caine Mutiny* or *The Deer Hunter* and see truthful representations of what the burden of war can do to some. Think about the nightmares of Doc Bradley mentioned in the book *Flags of our Fathers*. Understand why your grandfather or uncle or cousin was reluctant to talk about what they did in "The War." Look at the man saluting in the wheelchair. And I haven't even mentioned the hospitals and rows and rows of grave markers. The burden is real.

Our Forefathers pledged their life, liberty, and sacred honor to the Nation. Our service members do the same today. Millions who have served would do it again even knowing the price. Some have lost their sight, their legs, their lives and we *have* remained free. It may not seem fair, but Liberty is worth it. I do not suggest that every war or conflict we have entered has been a perfect defense of Liberty, but we can know that none were solely for conquest or oppression. By bearing this burden, we have advanced the cause of Liberty.

It is easy to lose track of those millions of individuals who have borne this burden. We can be tempted to lump their efforts into one indistinguishable whole. Everyone is important; no sacrifice can be forgotten.

An historian named Victor Davis Hanson, in his book *Ripples of Battle*, does a much better job explaining the fact that the service of our fallen has meaning. He begins his book by talking about his namesake: his uncle who died in the Pacific in World War II. He never knew the man, but could see that his life and death had mattered. Just by living, serving, fighting, and sacrificing, his uncle Victor had made a difference on his family, on his community, on the outcome of the war; not through some singlehanded, battle-changing act of unprecedented heroism, but by his service. I take comfort in that story and in the other accounts that Hanson uses to show how war and battle can make a positive difference on so many levels. I recommend it to you.

You see, our burdens — the long watches, the anxious patrols, the hot days, the unconditional support that families provide our service members, the act of being an informed and active voter — matter. Each of our lives of service is a ripple that advances the cause of Liberty. Our selfless service, taken together, becomes a wave and if there are enough of us, this wave will continue to wash over tyranny wherever it stands and cleanse it from our world.

Of course this burden has been compounded in the past by elements in our own country who have sought to undermine the efforts to preserve and advance the cause of Liberty we so desperately need. Whatever their name — Royalists, copperheads, socialists, isolationists, or the so called anti-war activists of today — they usually have one thing in common: they simply fail to realize that as the bumper sticker slogan so truly says, “Freedom is *Not* Free.” They generally offer no solution other than to sit quietly and hope that the enemies of Liberty will be nice to us. There is absolutely *no* successful precedent for that passivity and I cannot see one being established anytime soon.

We who serve and you who stand behind us must recognize and understand this burden. We must accept it and deal with it. We must prepare ourselves to face the psychological risks. We must commit to care for the physical damage ... if for no other reason than what is at stake if we do not continue to bear the burden of Liberty.

Never forget what this burden buys: You don't have to be wary because you will disappear if you say the wrong thing. You aren't forced to change your religion, or pay a special tax if you don't worship like the ruler says. You don't have to be afraid that someone will come and take away all your food because they want money to industrialize. You don't have to wonder if your government will turn on you at any moment. Governments have done these things in the past and even today in other countries, but not here!

If I have not yet convinced you that the blessings of Liberty are worth the burden, then let me mention a few of the alternatives: death camps, ethnic cleansing, head taxes unless you convert your faith, forced labor, dictatorship, pogroms, deliberate famine, slavery, the secret police, or any of dozens of evils that lurk in the realm of the tyrant.

Liberty is worth the burden. This burden is worth commemorating the sacrifice of the fallen. They are worth remembering.

Bonds

History and memory help form the bonds that connect us to the past — to those who have borne the burden and passed the torch of Liberty to us. By remembering, we who serve, the families who love us, and you citizens who support us build and reinforce links in a chain stretching back to even before that Declaration of Independence and dedication to Liberty so long ago.

Who are some of the links in that chain that come to mind? They are individuals, crews, and units. Men and women, average Joes, plain Janes, and children of privilege; they are us, you and me.

They are Nathan Hale, captured while spying for the Continental Army, standing resolutely at the gallows and declaring, “I regret that I have but one life to lose for my country.”

Remember the 4,435 others who died in battle and more than 1,400 still listed as missing from the Revolutionary War.

They are Navy Commodore Joshua Barney, his sailors, and Marines who made a heroic stand at the Battle of Bladensburg outside Washington.

Remember the 2,260 fallen and 695 missing from the War of 1812.

They are the First Minnesota Regiment on the second day at Gettysburg suffering 82 percent casualties as it hurled itself against the Confederates threatening to split the Union center.

Remember the 215,000 killed in action, the 400,000 other soldiers who died, and the thousands still missing from the American Civil War.

They are men from St. Cloud serving in the Philippines in 1899.

Remember the 385 killed in action, 2,000 other deaths, and 72 missing from the Spanish American War.

They are Minnesota’s 151st Field Artillery, part of the famous Rainbow Division fighting in the Meuse-Argonne or those Devil Dog Marines duking it out at Belleau Wood: “Retreat? Hell, we just got here!”

Remember the 53,402 battle deaths and more than 4,000 still missing from World War I.

The links in this chain remind us that Liberty and love of country are not limited to people of European descent. Like the men of the 761st Tank Battalion liberating concentration camps while their relatives could only use “colored” restrooms or the Nisei in the 442nd Infantry fighting their way up the Italian peninsula while their families waited at internment camps.

They are crews of the Coast Guard cutters *Icarus* and *Thetis* combating the U-Boat menace shortly after our entry into World War II or the Battling Bastards of Bataan like men of Brainerd's own Company A, 194th Tank Battalion, in the Philippines.

Remember the 291,000 American dead and more than 78,000 missing from World War II.

They are organizations like Strategic Air Command constantly vigilant for nuclear attack during the decades-long twilight of the Cold War.

Remember the dead and the hundreds still MIA who kept that Cold War from turning hot.

The people who forged these links may not have won every battle, like the men of Task Force Smith sent to buy time as the North Korean People's Army plowed south.

Remember the 33,000 who perished in combat and more than 8,000 still missing from the Korean War.

They are Minnesotans like Kenneth Olson, Robert Pruden, Laszlo Rabel, Leo Thorsness, and Dale Wayrynen who earned the Medal of Honor in Vietnam.

Remember the 47,000 who died in battle and the 1,700 still missing from Vietnam.

The bonds are formed by those who served in Desert Shield, Desert Storm, and any of a dozen operations since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Remember Captain Scott Speicher missing over Iraq since January 1991.

And of course, we can't forget the latest links connecting us to the past: units like Delta Battery, 216th Air Defense MNARNG, whose soldiers served with my battalion as part of the First Cavalry Division on the Airport Road in Baghdad earning the Valorous Unit Award in 2004 or the Headquarters of the 34th Infantry Division currently serving in Basra.

Remember the 66 service members from Minnesota among the 4,900 fatalities in Operations Iraqi and Enduring Freedom. Remember too, Spc. Ahmed Altaie missing since October 23, 2006.

What exactly should we remember?

Remember what they did for us.

How? I encourage you read about it yourself in any of a hundred great memoirs written by those who have served, but most simply, I recommend you think differently about war movies. Think about the heat and cold, the mud and dust, the hunger and thirst, the fear and pain, the guts and glory, the camaraderie and courage, the real

emotions and real people that are represented on the medium of film that we safely consume in our theaters and living rooms.

Why did these Americans do the brave things represented in films, in books, in legend?

If you were to ask most of them now, you would probably hear them say: “I did it for my buddies,” or “Because there was nothing better to do,” or some other humble response. But I believe that it was more than that. Bonds of camaraderie — a service member’s buddies — are no guarantee that an army will stay and fight; plenty of armies with strong bonds have quit the war or even turned on those they were supposed to defend. Why did these Americans do it? I’ll tell you why: they did it for you and me! They did it so we could have the same opportunity, the same chances — or even better ones — than they did. They did it for Liberty, the freedom to live our life, to be free to speak, free to worship, free from want, and free from fear.

Did they face difficult times and uncertainty? You bet! In addition to the chaos of war and hardship of military service, they faced crime, political crisis, economic depression, natural disasters, loss of loved ones, personal hardship, and a myriad of troubles many of which we will never know. However difficult, these challenges are all part of life; part of that price of freedom, that burden of Liberty. They are normal in the course of human history.

By asking you to remember, I am certainly not seeking compensation; just respect, just understanding, just a hand on the shoulder, a friendly smile, a thank you, a willingness to stand by our Veterans as they adjust. Don’t give up on us. Don’t pity us, but don’t forget us either. Support Veterans’ organizations such as Metrovets, the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, or Disabled American Veterans. Volunteer here at the VA. I told you I am a military historian; I have read hundreds of memoirs and histories on combat. My research suggests that one of the most important keys to a veteran’s successful return to society after completing service is finding or reinforcing purpose. If we can believe our sacrifice was worth it; if we can believe that what we did was necessary, good; OK, then we can move on and not be a prisoner to the burden of our experience. We can remember the camaraderie, the adventure, the energy of our service.

There have been some who have questioned the sacrifice, ridiculed the memory; they do not know that the reason we honor the fallen is not to entice future generations to war, but rather to ennoble, to hallow, in some small way, the sacrifice that our Veterans living and dead, who survived or perished in battle, made on our behalf. We should never glorify war, but we must always pay tribute however insignificant a repayment it may be to those who have borne the burden of Liberty firsthand.

Remember our Veterans, speak their names, encourage your friends to attend events like this, honor their sacrifice, recognize that it was worth it . . . work together to make sure that the causes remain just.

Conclusion

Liberty requires hard work, but the blessing remains worth the burden. For the past 21 years, I have been honored to bear the burden of protecting us from the enemies of Liberty. During that time, I have seen the Iron Curtain and the Gulag Archipelago collapse, I have helped bring peace and freedom to an area torn by ethnic strife, and I have defended my country against those who want us to live in fear and retreat from the world. I would do it all again and more if given the chance. I resolve to continue my defense of this Republic in whatever way I can. I will not ask, “What my country can do for me,” but rather, “What can I do for my country” as President Kennedy urged us to do before I was born.

I ask you today and every day to honor the memory of those who sacrificed their health, wealth, and their very lives that we might enjoy the blessings of Liberty. I ask you to join me in renewing our effort to ensure that the fallen are never forgotten.

Our country may not be perfect, but it remains the world’s last best hope as long as its citizens remain committed to the principle of Liberty. You can all contribute to the advancing of this principle by remembering those who have gone before you and — with their sacrifice as inspiration — you can forge new links in that unbroken chain of dedicated service so that the blessings of Liberty will continue. By building these bonds of memory that honor the burdens, we will strengthen the blessings of Liberty for generations to come.

Lt. Col. James C. Fischer retired as Professor of Military Science at the end of the 2009/10 academic year.

Acknowledgment

Photo on p. 110 courtesy of the *St. Cloud Times*.