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Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: Memorial Day

Las Cruces, NM | May 26, 2008

On this Memorial Day, as our nation honors its unbroken line of fallen heroes, our sense of patriotism is particularly strong. Because while we gather here under open skies, we know that far beyond the Organ Mountains – in the streets of Baghdad, and the outskirts of Kabul – America's sons and daughters are sacrificing on our behalf. And our thoughts and prayers are with them.

I speak to you today with deep humility. My grandfather marched in Patton's Army, but I cannot know what it is to walk into battle like so many of you. My grandmother worked on a bomber assembly line, but I cannot know what it is for a family to sacrifice like so many of yours have.

I am the father of two young girls, and I cannot imagine what it is to lose a child. My heart breaks for the families who've lost a loved one.

These are things I cannot know. But there are also some things I do know.

I know that our sadness today is mixed with pride; that those we've lost will be remembered by a grateful nation; and that our presence here today is only possible because your loved ones, America's patriots, were willing to give their lives to defend our nation.

I know that while we may come from different places, cherish different traditions, and have different political beliefs, we all – every one of us – hold in reverence those who've given this country the full measure of their devotion.

And I know that children in New Mexico and across this country look to your children, to your brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, and friends – to those we honor today – as a shining example of what's best about America.

Their lives are a model for us all.

What led these men and women to wear their country's uniform? What is it that leads anyone to put aside their own pursuit of life's comforts; to subordinate their own sense of survival, for something bigger – something greater?

Many of those we honor today were so young when they were killed. They had a whole life ahead of them – birthdays and weddings, holidays with children and grandchildren, homes and jobs and happiness of their own. And yet, at one moment or another, they felt the tug, just as generations of Americans did before them. Maybe it was a massacre in a Boston square; or a President's call to save the Union and free the slaves. Maybe it was the day of infamy that awakened a nation to a storm in the Pacific and a madman's death march across Europe. Or maybe it was the morning they woke up to see our walls of security crumble along with our two largest towers.

Whatever the moment was, when it came and they felt that tug, perhaps it was simply the thought of a mom or a dad, a husband or a wife, or a child not yet born that made this young American think that it was time to go; that made them think "I must serve so that the people I love can live – in happiness, and safety, and freedom."

This sense of service is what America is all about. It is what leads Americans to enter the military. It is what sustains them in the most difficult hours. And it is the safeguard of our security.

You see, America has the greatest military in the history of the world. We have the best training, the most

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advanced technology, the most sophisticated planning, and the most powerful weapons. And yet, in the end, though each of these things is absolutely critical, the true strength of our military lies someplace else.

It lies in the spirit of America's servicemen and women. No matter whether they faced down fascism or fought for freedom in Korea and Vietnam; liberated Kuwait or stopped ethnic cleansing in the Balkans or serve brilliantly and bravely under our flag today; no matter whether they are black, white, Latino, Asian, or Native American; whether they come from old military families, or are recent immigrants – their stories tell the same truth.

It is not simply their bravery, their insistence on doing their part – whatever the cost – to make America more secure and our world more free. It's not simply an unflinching belief in our highest ideals. It's that in the thick of battle, when their very survival is threatened, America's sons and daughters aren't thinking about themselves, they're thinking about one another; they're risking everything to save not their own lives, but the lives of their fellow soldiers and sailors, airmen and Marines. And when we lose them – in a final act of selflessness and service – we know that they died so that their brothers and sisters, so that our nation, might live.

What makes America's servicemen and women heroes is not just their sense of duty, honor, and country; it's the bigness of their hearts and the breadth of their compassion.

That is what we honor today.

Oliver Wendell Holmes once remarked that "To fight out a war, you must believe something and want something with all your might." The Americans we honor today believed. Sergeant Ryan Jopek believed. Ryan was just weeks away from coming home when he volunteered for a mission to Mosul from which he would never return. His friends remember his easy smile; I remember Ryan because of the bracelet his mother gave me that I wear every day. Next to his name, it reads: "All gave some – he gave all."

It is a living reminder of our obligation as Americans to serve Ryan as well as he served us; as well as the wounded warriors I've had the honor of meeting at Walter Reed have served us; as well as the soldiers at Fort Bliss and the troops in Iraq, Afghanistan, and around the world are serving us. That means giving the same priority to building a 21st century VA as to building a 21st century military. It means having zero tolerance for veterans sleeping on our streets. It means bringing home our POWs and MIAs. And it means treating the graves of veterans like the hallowed ground it is and banning protests near funerals.

But it also means something more. It means understanding that what Ryan and so many Americans fought and died for is not a place on a map or a certain kind of people. What they sacrificed for – what they gave all for – is a larger idea – the idea that a nation can be governed by laws, not men; that we can be equal in the eyes of those laws; that we can be free to say what we want, write what we want, and worship as we please; that we can have the right to pursue our own dreams, but the obligation to help our fellow Americans pursue theirs.

So on this day, of all days, let's memorialize our fallen heroes by honoring all who wear our country's uniform; and by completing their work to make America more secure and our world more free. But let's also do our part – service-member and civilian alike – to live up to the idea that so many of our fellow citizens have consecrated – the idea of America. That is the essence of patriotism. That is the lesson of this solemn day. And that is the task that lies ahead. May God bless you, and may God bless the United States of America.



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