

Memorial Day – May 30th, 2006 – Presentation at Teaneck, NJ

Mayor Kates, Reverend LeCroy, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

Thank you all for being here this morning. There are many things to do on a beautiful day like today – by choosing to be here your actions speak loudly – you join together in remembering and honoring our fallen heroes.

We are gathered this morning as are many others across this great country to remember those who have died in the nation's wars.

One hundred and forty years ago Americans began decorating the graves of Civil War veterans. In 1868, May 30th was designated – as, I quote–“a day for strewing with flowers or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country” And so it was called “Decoration Day.” Today we call it Memorial Day.

To some of us Memorial Day has a face. That face is a parent, or a sibling or perhaps a child. To some that face is a buddy with whom we served. To some a classmate whose yearbook picture brings back memories of happier days. Or that face belongs to the kid down the block who used to play with our own children.

And there are so many faces of Memorial Day that we do not know. Since the American Revolution over 40 million men and women have served in our armed forces. Over 650,000 have died in battle, and nearly half a million have died of other causes during wars. These are not simply numbers – these are each and every single one, not only a face but a vibrant life – a life cut short protecting us and our way of life.

We remember each and every one today.

It matters not the circumstances of their death – the marine who died in 1943 storming an enemy emplacement on Tarawa in the Gilbert Islands, or the soldier whose jeep rolled over at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, both are lives to remember. It matters not their race or their ethnicity or their religion or their gender. It matters not if they were rich or poor, an 18 year old Buck Private or a 60 year old General – it matters only that they served their country. And today we remember each and every one.

War is controversial – but the sacrifice of those who serve is not! When you remember the fallen soldier I urge you not to get caught up in the politics of war – the “popularity” of a war is irrelevant. The greatest generation came home from World War II as heroes. The Korean War is called by many the “forgotten war.” Viet Nam certainly was not popular. There was no welcome home – and it hurt – and this had a serious negative impact on many veterans. My gut tells me that there will be no tickertape parades for those heroes currently serving democracy around the world – they certainly deserve better!

There are some who claim that war is wrong on moral or religious grounds – but in balance religion is not anti-war. Religion is pro-peace. Yes, we read in Isaiah, “they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” But we also read in the bible, in the book of Exodus, “The Lord is a man of war, the Lord is his name. He cast Pharaoh's chariots and his Army into the sea.”

Consider, also, Saint Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiæ*," – he discusses the concept known as a Just War. Again I quote – "We do not seek peace in order to be at war, but we go to war that we may have peace."

Each of us has the freedom to publicly debate war and peace -- Do not forget the soldier who has paid for this freedom with his or her blood.

Today, television makes war a spectator sport – turn on the TV, watch a few minutes of war footage, and listen to a few sound bites. Unless we have a loved one in harm's way, war has little impact on our day-to-day life. We go about our business with little to remind us of the brave men and women around the world who protect us each day. When my niece was stationed in Kyrgyzstan I worried and prayed for her, but I didn't think about her 24 x 7 – for the most part, it has been business as usual on the home front.

In closing, there are two related topics that I wish to briefly bring to your attention. First the veteran who has served in previous wars and second the soldier who is currently serving in the war on terrorism.

There are nearly 25 million veterans in the U.S., 10 million are over the age of 65. They need your support. I recall a Battle of the Bulge veteran telling me that it was so cold that the troops would sleep standing up leaning against each other like tent poles – clinging to each other for warmth. To lie down on the ground was to freeze to death. We need to remember their sacrifice and see to it that they get the care they need.

Second, remember today's soldier. There are over 1.4 million American men and women in uniform around the world. These heroes need for you to be on their side in every way.

When I was a young boy in Cleveland, Ohio, I had a neighbor who lost a leg in the war – He walked on sturdy wooden crutches, his pants leg neatly folded in half. Today thousands of young men and women are coming home, having survived life altering wounds. Many will bear visible scars, perhaps requiring artificial limbs – and many will be suffering from wounds we cannot see – what was once called "shell shock" is now termed Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

My former boss, the late General William Childs Westmoreland closed his autobiography with the following quotation: "As a soldier prays for peace, he must be prepared to cope with the hardships of war and bear its scar." So I ask you to remember those who bear war's scars.

As we remember our fallen soldiers, also keep today's soldier in your hearts and in your prayers.

One of the things I learned in my years of service is not to keep the troops out in the hot sun too long. So let me finish with God Bless the United States of America.