

Memorial Day

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Memorial Day Speech

given May 30th, 1938

Baton Rouge, Louisiana

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is related that the Duke of Wellington on being asked what, in his opinion was the most dreadful thing next to defeat replied: "The greatest tragedy other than defeat is victory." Assembled here today in serious mood, gathered together for the purpose of honoring those who have made the supreme sacrifice in the service of their country - we may, perhaps acknowledge the truth and wisdom of Wellington's remark. The pen of history records the Revolutionary War the War of 1812, the War with Mexico, the Civil War, the war with Spain and the last great world war as American victories. But, in the presence of these, our hallowed dead, as we glance backward over the pages of history we can appreciate and sense that there was tragedy implicit in every victory. And so on this occasion, as we come to the observance of Memorial Day, it is fitting that we should remember and pay tribute to those gallant patriots who stood forth in defense of our country against enemies who would have destroyed it. It is fitting that this day should be dedicated to that vast army of martyrs who put devotion to duty ahead of life itself in every generation of American history, from the beginning of the republic down to our own times. But for the victories that their tragic sacrifices gave us we would have no country today; but for the heritage that they saved for us freedom would be no more. Yet even for such causes we still can feel, in the language of Lord Byron:

"Oh God! It is a fearful thing
To see the human soul take wing
In any shape, in any mood."

But the answer comes from Browning who has pointed out that:

"Death with the might of his sunbeam
Touches the flesh, and the soul awakes!"

The souls of these our honored dead are still awake and the spirit of patriotism that motivated their heroic deeds is yet alive. The fostering and preservation of that spirit of patriotism is the true lesson that we Americans should learn from Memorial Day. The greatest honor that this nation could possibly bestow upon the dead honored here today would be to live for those things for which they fought, bled and died.

And for what did these patriots fight and die? Not for war but for peace,; for liberty, for freedom, for Democracy. The things for which they died are not unimportant platitudinous ideals. They are the vitals of the American way of life; the blood and sinews of our republic.

We Americans want peace. We wish to follow the natural order in which peace is the natural state of man; war is man's corruption. With heavy war clouds gathered over other continents the slightest shifting of the breeze might bring to us in America another martial cloudburst with human misery and sacrifice in its wake. Our efforts should be and must be directed toward avoiding such a catastrophe and the best way to avoid war is to be well prepared not for aggression but for defense. We Americans are not a warlike people; we harbor no national envies. We covet no possessions of other nations. Blessed with a self-sufficient abundance of natural resources, raw materials and finished products we have no reason therefore, for making war. Our sole military and naval needs are for defense. As long as we are prepared to defend ourselves, the danger of war being brought to this country is minimized to the lowest possible point. And those who oppose or who would deny us an adequate national

defense--in army and in navy -- however sincere their motives may be,-- are following the road that leads to war. In striving for peace we can in a measure repay the debt to our war dead who sacrificed all in the cause of peace not of war. But if our efforts should be unavailing and should another war visit its terrors upon our nation--and God grant that it never will-- the vast majority of American citizens would spring loyally to arms with the same fervor that has marked our readiness to defend ourselves in the past.

These dead died for liberty for freedom and for democracy. There are peace-time enemies of these ideals. The foe of democracy in these days does not always come in regimented columns, with drums rolling and bayonets gleaming. He comes stealthily, with high-sounding promises of a dreamy Utopia. His ammunition may be money and propoganda and subversive doctrines spread in our factories, our churches, our business houses, even among the children of our schools. Here we should be ever vigilant.

The peoples of other nations may be content to sacrifice freedom and personal liberty in following a dictator. That is their concern. So in Russia in Germany and in Italy if freedom and liberty do not exist--this is a matter to be settled by Russia, Germany and Italy.--But in America we cherish our freedom and have no room for dictatorship--We have no room for fascism, Hitlerism, or Communism. Since we do not try to force our form of government upon other nations; other nations must not try to force theirs upon us. On this American continent, under the stars and stripes, we have founded the greatest republic of free people that ever blessed humanity. It is yours and it is mine to preserve, to hand down to our children as the social heritage of free men and women for all time.

A United America, imbued with the same spirit of patriotism, of self-sacrifice and devotion to these United States as the honored dead memorialized here today, can and will solve the perplexing social and economic problems that

beset us under the democratic form of government.

On this Memorial Day, then can we say, can we hope, and can we pray in the language of Lincoln that "these dead have not died in vain." And as we deck flowers on the graves of those who died in service of this nation and as the ken of our vision passes over rows of graves, rows upon row, these beautiful expressive lines are called to mind:

Row on row the crosses

Flash brilliant in the sun,

Crosses that speak of valor

And noble duty done;

Crosses that breathe the anguish

Of loved ones far away

Crosses banked with flowers

On each Memorial Day.

Crosses that summon memories

Of Flander's poppies red,

Crosses fashioned out of tears

And prayers of mothers said;

Crosses that stand as warnings

To force and tyrant kings,

Crosses of peace eternal

And all that Freedom brings.

Crosses that speak of hunger

And rain and sweat and mud,

Crosses that stand as symbols

Of priceless human blood;

Crosses that tell of marches
And hard fought battles won
Crosses that speak of valor
And noble duty done.

May these crosses and may the invisible crosses of bereavement that are borne by American families from North to South and from East to West teach us to cherish and to hold dear those ideals of Americanism for which these honored dead have fought and died and may we in carrying on , ever strive toward the accomplishment of the American ideal of one nation, indivisible with liberty and justice for all.