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Memorial Day, New York City

U.S.S. *Intrepid*

25 May 2015

I want to thank you Mel (Immergut) for that very kind introduction and I want to offer my personal welcome especially to all the military personnel and veterans joining today's ceremony.

Today, at this sacred event, I am honored to represent ALL FIVE branches of Americas Armed Forces for today's ceremony – your Army, Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard, and Marine Corps. I also want to acknowledge that this event, memorializing America's fallen heroes, is being done in exactly the right place and that is on the deck of the *USS Intrepid* that at the same time serves as a museum, and a memorial, whose goal is honor our war dead educating the public, and inspiring our youth.

Intrepid, a ship who fought our nation's battles for over three decades, in peace and war, and of the 270 *Intrepid* crewmembers—sailors and Marines—who gave their lives aboard this ship and in her aircraft. These decks are truly hallowed ground.

I also wanted to offer a special thanks to the representatives of the nation of Colombia with us today, a nation with whom the United States has a very special relationship with in our Hemisphere. A nation that stood with us during World War II as few nations in the Americas did, fought the U-Boat war with us in the Caribbean, and later fought alongside us in the Korean Conflict. Indeed we in the U.S. Military were proud to welcome the storied 1st Colombian Brigade of over 1,000 volunteers to our family, a unit that suffered 131 killed, 476 wounded and 69 missing in action—forever, while serving with the U.S. 24th Infantry Division. And the Colombians stand with us today as few others do in the fight against terrorism and lawlessness, and in so doing as we speak suffer terrible casualties. Colombia is represented today by their Minister of Defense Juan Pinzon, The Colombian Ambassador to the United Nations Maria Ema Majia, the Colombian Defense Attaché General Sergio Mantilla, and the their wounded warriors with them today who we honor. Their presence, our Colombian allies, is for

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them to say thanks to the American people on this special day for our friendship and support in their fight against the narco-terrorists in their country all fueled by the drug demand in the US.

Memorial Day. First, a few statistics to ponder. There are twenty-five million living American veterans. Since General George Washington commanded the Continental Army forty-two million Americans have served the colors. A million have been killed in its defense. Another million and a half wounded. When most of us think about military cemeteries the first thought that comes to mind is “America’s Valhalla,” Arlington National Cemetery in northern Virginia, but there are many, many more across the United States, and another 24 American cemeteries overseas with 125,000 graves of our fallen—61,000 in France alone—the result of two wars that saved Europe from unimaginable horrors.

There are also memorials like Intrepid to another 94,000 Americans lost at sea winning the U-boat war in the Atlantic or defeating Imperial Japan in the seas around the Philippines, Peleliu, Leyte Gulf and Okinawa, or to the warriors whose remains were never recovered from a thousand foreign battlefields. With all this service and loss we as Americans can be proud of the kind of people we are as we have fought not to conquer others but to defend ourselves. We have never enslaved any with whom we have fought... we possess no empire. On the contrary billions across the planet are today free, billions yet unborn will live free because Americans have fought and died, and, once peace achieved, we rebuilt the destroyed cities, economies, and societies of those who only days before were our enemies.

Memorial Day was established by Presidential Decree on the 5th of May 1868, and first observed later that month on the 30th when all of the graves at Arlington National Cemetery—Union and Confederate—were decorated with flowers and flags. It was only three years after our terrible Civil War that finally established what kind of nation we would be. A war in which 600,000 Americans—South and North--perished for the cause they held dearer than their own lives. For a century the day continued to mean

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visiting and decorating graves or town-square memorials to those who died serving our great nation, and celebrating with parades and civic events. Americans in the past kept the day quiet pausing to remember, at least for a little while, the kind of men and women that so willingly gave the last full measure. Of the immensity of the sacrifice they made for those who remained safe and protected at home.

A hundred years on in the 1960s when I was a teenager our Memorial Day remained the same and revolved mostly around the losses of two world wars and Korea. And while the millions of veterans of those terrible wars stood in quiet respect for a quarter of a million and more of their own their buddies killed in those wars, they welcomed home the 50,000 dead—some their own sons and grandsons—who fell fighting and dying in far off Vietnam and whose nation disgraced itself by turning its back on the men it sent to fight when it lost interest in the cause.

That was a time when boys like me were surrounded by men, real men, who had gladly worn the country's cloth in wars against militarism, fascism and communism. The earliest memories we had as kids were of comic books and paper backs that honored the sacrifices of the super heroes of those conflicts. It was a time when the most violent games played by little boys was "army men" with toy guns, and back then they were not considered at risk to develop into murderous psychopaths. Or standing up and removing one's hat when the national anthem was played, or saying the pledge of allegiance and a prayer to any God a young child worshiped at the beginning of every school day, was not too much trouble...or considered offensive to someone else's sensitivities or seen as trampling on the rights of anyone.

It was a time when names like Pearl Harbor, Guadalcanal, Midway and Coral Sea, Sicily, Tarawa, Salerno, Iwo Jima, Normandy, and the Hurtgen Forest were real to our dads. And the terrible battles of Seoul, the Yalu River and the Chosen Reservoir in Korea just as real to their younger brothers, and they all watched in reverence as their own sons clashed in a thousand nameless jungle battles and in the skies over Vietnam. It was all so real to us then, Memorial Day was, and we knew without thinking—and to our

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souls—that we owed this country, and our precious war dead and their families, a debt we could never repay.

We live in a very different world today, and as a people have indeed lost something of quality over the years. We don't always see that same selfless devotion to something bigger than self. Memorial Day today is more about a day off to take advantage of the big sales at the malls or car dealerships, or fighting the traffic to get a long weekend at the sea shore or lake side. But we should be ashamed of ourselves if we forget that as we enjoy the long weekend that we are today again at war, and a new Greatest Generation continues to fight and win against a merciless enemy on our behalf in the Middle East and in many other locations around the globe.

And although Memorial Day is all about our military members who have paid the ultimate price for their devotion to our nation, I would be remiss as we sit literally in the shadows of what once were the towers if I failed to mention another kind of hero—our law enforcement and intelligence professionals of every variety. Our uniformed police, FBI, CIA, NSA, Department of Homeland Security, DEA, and first responders of every sort who protect the nation and its citizens in this endless fight against those who would do us harm regardless of whether the attack is as destructive as 9/11, or as pointless as Boston. We can never forget, and should always be inspired by the sacrifices, of police officers like Brian Moore, Rafael Ramos or Wenjian Lu all recently killed in the line of duty on the streets of this city. And these men, until they fell and themselves became part of the “blue legend,” stood proudly on the shoulders of 50 others who fell in the attacks on 9/11, and another 50 killed in the line of duty across our nation this last year alone.

And of the 343 firefighters lost trying to save the lives of so many innocent civilians trapped in the towers that day enduring unspeakable agonies until they went to God. Of Engine 23 that lost all hands including a firefighter, and Army Reserve officer, Mark Whitford. Many of their bodies never recovered. I mention this because many of those men and women took the West Side Highway—right past where we sit right now on *Intrepid*—on their last run down to the World Trade Center. God had already decided

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to take these heroes, although they did not know it as they fearlessly rushed to and not away from the danger. Yet had they known they had only an hour left in their lives they'd have gone anyway because to citizens like them duty is sacred, and steadfast service more important, than life itself.

You could clearly see the burning Towers from *Intrepid* that day, and we can only wonder what those valiant cops and firefighters might have felt as they raced past this great ship knowing full well its symbolism to this city...to America. I like to think the ghosts of the 270 crewmembers who died serving *Intrepid* felt intense pride as they watched young Americans just like themselves rush to their deaths in service to their countrymen, and that the same ghosts welcomed them aboard for eternity when they fell. I read later that priests at Saint Peter's Catholic Church on the West Side of Lower Manhattan gave battlefield absolution to some of those men as they leapt off their trucks and sprinted headlong into the blazing infernos.

If you know a member of your Armed Forces, and most Americans tragically do not, then you know what I am talking about. They have a look in their eye and a way of walking that marks them as warriors as good as any that have ever marched to the guns, but they are not born killers. They are, as they have always been, good and decent youngsters mostly from the neighborhoods of our cities, and small towns across America. Almost all are from “salt of the earth” working class homes and more often than not are the sons and daughters of cops and firemen, factory and service workers, farmers and the like. Kids who once delivered your papers, stocked shelves in the grocery store, played Little League baseball and pickup hockey in the local rink, and served Mass on Sunday morning.

They are ordinary young people performing remarkable acts of bravery and selfless acts of devotion to a cause bigger than themselves. They did not avoid the most basic and cherished responsibility of a citizen—to defend the nation and its people—on the contrary, they welcomed it. They are the best our country produces and have consciously put every American above their own self-interest. They are all heroes, and

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know and understand fear in a way that thankfully few Americans do. Like veterans throughout our history they have endured things in our defense that will haunt them for the rest of their lives, but they are comforted that the vast majority of their countrymen and women they have sworn to protect will never have to deal with memories so terrible.

Memorial Day is not for our cherished Gold Star families, but for the nation and its citizens to remember. The families of the fallen need no reminder...they remember every day; all day....it never goes away. They remember every second of every day the lives of their loved one until the instant they were informed of their deaths, and then run those memories through their minds and their hearts 1,000 times a day, every day thereafter.

The story of a Gold Star family starts in nearly the exact same way and most often with a knock on the door in the early morning hours by a casualty officer who'd been sitting outside the house waiting anxiously for hours for the first lights to come on. He dreaded the mission he'd been assigned that day. He was not glad to be there, but he was privileged to be there as the duty is a sacred one. It is an honor to be called to do it. The minute the door opened and a family member sees him framed in the doorway they know...they know without being told...before he uttered his first words...they knew.

After that it varies a bit. Some collapse in grief and cover their faces screaming and striking out in panic and disbelief as images of a happy little boy or girl race thorough their minds. Others slam the door trying to somehow turn back the clock and make it go away. Most, however, simply invite the casualty officer in, offer a cup of coffee and sit quietly as the story of the death of someone so loved is related in words that don't seem to make any sense...are nearly impossible to comprehend. Every casualty call is a little different but in the end the result is the same: a family is brought to its knees in a grief that is unexpectedly physical in its impact on the body, unbearable to the mind, and agonizing to the heart...a grief that never goes away. Not even with the passage of time.

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Then begins the waiting and the heartache seems to turn minutes to hours, and hours to days. The family waits because there is little left to do as the military with precision, and reverence, brings the remains of their cherished loved one home to the country they served...to rest in the good earth of the America they loved. They are now part of a legend that God willing will never end—our America. In past wars since the birth of our Republic the burden of stopping such evil fell on the shoulders of an entire generation. Today the task is taken up by only 1% of America. They are men and women of character who believed in this country enough to put life and limb on the line without qualification, and without thought of personal gain.

Aside from everything else their families have endured over the loss of their loved one they can be proud of the decision to serve...of the commitment to defend their nation when they did not have to. Proud of their loved one who stepped forward when the vast majority never even consider it. Proud that by this one very personal decision—to serve a cause higher than themselves regardless of the outcome to them personally—their fallen loved one gave answer to two questions that have over the centuries defined the dedication of free and righteous men and women in the fight against wickedness: “If not me, who? If not now, when”?

If we did not have citizens willing to not only ask, but also to act on these questions, we would have lost in our struggle for independence in 1776. Slavery might never have been eradicated from our shores, and the rights of all Americans under the law might still be just a dream. The Nazis would have triumphed. The death camps never liberated and eliminated. Untold millions never saved from the gas chambers and furnaces. The cancer of communism responsible for the deaths of 100 million would never have been thrown onto the dust bin of history. And today the high tide of Islamic intolerance and extremism—an empire of hate that Osama bin Laden himself proclaimed would last forever—will not prevail. That is the kind of men and women we remember on this Memorial Day...on every Memorial Day.

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And their families should know and hopefully take comfort in the fact that when they fell they were not alone. When they went, they were surrounded by the finest men and women on this earth—their buddies—who desperately tried to save their lives. They held their hands, and tried to comfort them, prayed with them, listened to all the little stories about their families and their homes...until they were gone. They were not alone and when the spirit left them and God in his infinite wisdom took them to his bosom, their military family lovingly sent them home. In this their last journey, they were never alone. At every stop along the way they were treated with the greatest reverence and deepest respect due a fallen hero until members of the service they proudly joined brought them home.

In my hundreds of trips to military hospitals around the country since 2003 and the start of the war I've visited with thousands of grievously wounded American kids and their families. No matter how battered they were, no matter how many arms or legs they'd lost, their families thanked God they'd come home to them alive...but they also always very quietly asked me if it was worth it. I never tried to answer that question—I couldn't—it wasn't one of my boys lying in the hospital bed. I could never fathom the inner most thoughts of a parent who stood watch through the night at the bedside of someone they loved so much, who was so terribly wounded. Who was I to offer an opinion?

And in my dozens of conversations with families of the fallen at Dover Air Force Base, or at gravesides at Arlington, or at gathering's like this, I have been similarly asked if it was worth the life of someone they brought into the world, raised and nurtured so lovingly, and so much looked forward to seeing grow and find wonderful husbands and wives, and give them grandchildren to spoil. Again, I had no right to reply because as hard as I tried to understand what the immensity of their loss might be, and the depth of the sorrow in their heart, I knew it was impossible. My sense then was it is inconceivable for anyone to understand that has not had his own heart pierced with such sadness. I learned I was right.

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Since the instant I received the news in the foyer of my own home from a casualty officer executing his sacred duty, until the day he was buried two weeks later, I asked myself the same question a million times over. I did not have to wait until I unexpectedly caught a glimpse of him in a picture at the house, or when a thought of an earlier time came to mind, or in a quiet and unguarded moment when his loss washed over me in emotions I still can't control. From the moment I had my turn standing in the door looking into the glistening eyes of a casualty officer, and after that when I woke my wonderful wife and crushed her heart with the news, or while picking my wonderful daughter up off the floor where she worked, I desperately tried to convince myself that it was all for something...I worked so hard at believing his life was worth the sacrifice on the altar of America's freedom.

But it all came to me the day we buried him in the sacred ground that is Arlington, at Section 60, Gravesite #9480, sitting next to his beautiful young wife, that it simply does not matter at all what we the living think. The only thing that matters is what he thought. That he had decided it was more important to be where he was that morning in the Sangin River Valley, Afghanistan, to be doing what he was doing with the Marines and Navy Doc he loved so much and led so well in what was at that time the most dangerous place on earth. In his mind—and in his heart—he had decided somewhere between the day he was born at 2130, 5 September 1981 and 0719, 9 November 2010, that it was worth it to him to risk everything—even his life—in the service of his country.

So in spite of the terrible emptiness that is in a corner of my heart and I now know will be there until I see him again, and the corners of the hearts of everyone who ever knew him, we are proud...so very proud. Was it worth his life? It's not for me to say. He answered the question for me.

It has been my distinct honor to have had the opportunity to be with you here this weekend. I am confident that our America, this experiment in democracy started just over two centuries ago, will forever remain the "land of the free and home of the brave" so long as we never run out of tough young Americans who are willing to look beyond

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their own self-interest and comfortable lives, and go into the darkest and most dangerous places on earth to hunt down, and kill, those who would do us harm.

God Bless America, Ladies and Gentlemen, may all of our revered war dead rest, may we who loved them find peace and understanding in their sacrifice, and that the America that they so loved and protected, and gave their lives for, is forever worthy of their sacrifice. Of this I pray.

*Semper Fidelis**

*Marine Corps motto "Always Faithful"