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The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

May 27, 2013

Remarks by the President Commemorating Memorial Day

Arlington National Cemetery
Arlington, Virginia

11:31 A.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you. (Applause.) Please be seated. Thank you very much. Good morning, everybody. I want to thank Secretary Chuck Hagel, not only for the introduction but, Chuck, for your lifetime of service -- from sergeant in the Army to Secretary of Defense, but always a man who carries with you the memory of friends and fallen heroes from Vietnam. We're grateful to you.

I want to thank General Dempsey, Major General Linnington, Kathryn Condon, who has served Arlington with extraordinary dedication and grace and who will be leaving us, but we are so grateful for the work that she's done; for Chaplain Brainerd, Secretary Shinseki, all our guests. And most of all, to members of our armed services and our veterans; to the families and friends of the fallen who we honor today; to Americans from all across the country who have come to pay your respects: I have to say it is always a great honor to spend this Memorial Day with you at this sacred place where we honor our fallen heroes -- those who we remember fondly in our memories, and those known only to God.

Beyond these quiet hills, across that special bridge, is a city of monuments dedicated to visionary leaders and singular moments in the life of our Republic. But it is here, on this hallowed ground, where we choose to build a monument to a constant thread in the American character -- the truth that our nation endures because it has always been home to men and women who are willing to give their all, and lay down their very lives, to preserve and protect this land that we love.

That character -- that selflessness -- beats in the hearts of the very first patriots who died for a democracy they had never known and would never see. It lived on in the men and women who fought to hold our union together, and in those who fought to defend it abroad -- from the beaches of Europe to the mountains and jungles of Asia. This year, as we mark the 60th anniversary of the end of fighting in Korea, we offer a special salute to all those who served and gave their lives in the Korean War. And over the last decade, we've seen the character of our country again -- in the nearly 7,000 Americans who have made the ultimate sacrifice on battlefields and city streets half a world away.

Last Memorial Day, I stood here and spoke about how, for the first time in nine years, Americans were no longer fighting and dying in Iraq. Today, a transition is underway in Afghanistan, and our troops are coming home. Fewer Americans are making the ultimate sacrifice in Afghanistan, and that's progress for which we are profoundly grateful. And this time next year, we will mark the final Memorial Day of our war in Afghanistan.

And so, as I said last week, America stands at a crossroads. But even as we turn the page on a decade of conflict, even as we look forward, let us never forget, as we gather here today, that our nation is still at war.

It should be self-evident. And in generations past, it was. And during World War II, millions of Americans contributed to the war effort -- soldiers like my own grandfather; women like my grandmother, who worked the assembly lines. During the Vietnam War, just about everybody knew somebody -- a brother, a son, a friend -- who served in harm's way.

Today, it's different. Perhaps it's a tribute to our remarkable all-volunteer force, made up of men and women who step forward to serve and do so with extraordinary skill and valor. Perhaps it's a testament to our advanced technologies, which allow smaller numbers of troops to wield greater and greater power. But regardless of the reason, this truth cannot be ignored that today most Americans are not directly touched by war.

As a consequence, not all Americans may always see or fully grasp the depth of sacrifice, the profound costs that are made in our name -- right now, as we speak, every day. Our troops and our military families understand this, and they mention to me their concern about whether the country fully appreciates what's happening. I think about a letter I received from a Naval officer, a reservist who had just returned from a deployment to Afghanistan. And he wrote me, "I'm concerned that our work in Afghanistan is fading from memory." And he went on to ask that we do more to keep this conflict "alive and focused in the hearts and minds of our own people."

And he's right. As we gather here today, at this very moment, more than 60,000 of our fellow Americans still serve far from home in Afghanistan. They're still going out on patrol, still living in spartan forward operating bases, still risking their lives to carry out their mission. And when they give their lives, they are still being laid to rest in cemeteries in the quiet corners across our country, including here in Arlington.

Captain Sara Cullen had a smile that could light up a room and a love of country that led her to West Point. And after graduation, Sara became a Black Hawk pilot -- and married a former Black Hawk pilot. She was just 27 years old when she and four other soldiers were killed in a helicopter crash during a training mission near Kandahar. This past April, Sara was laid to rest here, in Section 60. Today, Sara is remembered by her mother, Lynn, who says she is "proud of her daughter's life, proud of her faith and proud of her service to our country." (Applause.)

Staff Sergeant Frankie Phillips came from a military family and was as tough as they come. A combat medic, Frankie was on patrol in Afghanistan three weeks ago when his vehicle was hit by a roadside bomb. He was so humble that his parents never knew how many lives he had saved until soldiers started showing up at his funeral from thousands of miles away. And last week, Frankie was laid to

rest just a few rows over from Sara.

Staff Sergeant Eric Christian was a born leader. A member of the Marine Corps Special Operations Command, Eric had served five tours of duty, but kept going back because he felt responsible for his teammates and was determined to finish the mission. On May 4th, Eric gave his life after escorting a high-ranking U.S. official to meet with Afghan leaders. Later, his family got a letter from a Marine who had served two tours with Eric. In it, the Marine wrote, "There were people who measured their success based on how many enemies they killed or how many missions they led to conquer a foe. Eric based his success on how many of his friends he brought home, and he brought home many -- including me." Eric was laid to rest here at Arlington, just six days ago. (Applause.)

So today, we remember their service. Today, just steps from where these brave Americans lie in eternal peace, we declare, as a proud and grateful nation, that their sacrifice will never be forgotten. And just as we honor them, we hold their families close. Because for the parents who lose a child; for the husbands and wives who lose a partner; for the children who lose a parent, every loss is devastating. And for those of us who bear the solemn responsibility of sending these men and women into harm's way, we know the consequences all too well. I feel it every time I meet a wounded warrior, every time I visit Walter Reed, and every time I grieve with a Gold Star family.

And that's why, on this day, we remember our sacred obligation to those who laid down their lives so we could live ours: to finish the job these men and women started by keeping our promise to those who wear America's uniform -- to give our troops the resources they need; to keep faith with our veterans and their families, now and always; to never stop searching for those who have gone missing or who are held as prisoners of war.

But on a more basic level, every American can do something even simpler. As we go about our daily lives, we must remember that our countrymen are still serving, still fighting, still putting their lives on the line for all of us.

Last fall, I received a letter from Candie Averette, of Charlotte, North Carolina. Both of her sons are Marines. Her oldest served two tours in Iraq. Her youngest was in Afghanistan at the time. He was, in her words, "100 percent devoted to his deployment and wouldn't have had it any other way."

Reading Candie's letter, it was clear she was extraordinarily proud of the life her boys had chosen. But she also had a request on behalf of all the mothers just like her. She said, "Please don't forget about my child and every other Marine and soldier over there who proudly choose to defend their country."

A mother's plea -- please don't forget. On this Memorial Day, and every day, let us be true and meet that promise. Let it be our task, every single one of us, to honor the strength and the resolve and the

love these brave Americans felt for each other and for our country. Let us never forget to always remember and to be worthy of the sacrifice they make in our name.

May God bless the fallen and all those who serve. And may God continue to bless the United States of America. (Applause.)

END

11:44 A.M. EDT



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