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The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

May 26, 2014

Remarks by the President On Memorial Day -- Arlington National Cemetery

Arlington National Cemetery

Arlington, Virginia

11:38 A.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you. (Applause.) Thank you so much. Please be seated. Thank you, Secretary Hagel, for your introduction and for your lifetime of service -- from a young Army sergeant in Vietnam to our nation's 24th Secretary of Defense.

Vice President Biden, Jill, Chairman Dempsey, Major General Buchanan, Patrick Hallinan, Chaplain Brainerd; to our men and women in uniform here and around the world; to our outstanding veterans; and, most of all, to the Gold Star families here to remember the loved ones you've lost: Michelle and I are humbled and honored to commemorate this Memorial Day with you.

Every year, this ceremony marks another page in the life of our nation -- this year in particular, as we recognize the 150th anniversary of this holy space, Arlington National Cemetery. One hundred and fifty years ago, war raged on hillsides and farmlands not far from where we gather today. A nation ill-prepared for war found itself overwhelmed with the task of burying so many of its sons. So we declared upon this hill a final resting place for those willing to lay down their lives for the country that we love. And on a spring day in 1864, Private William Christman of Pennsylvania was the first American to find eternal rest on these grounds.

Over that century and a half, in times of war, in times of peace, Americans have come here -- to pay tribute not only to the loved ones who meant the world to them, but to all our heroes, known and unknown. Here, in perfect military order, lie the patriots who won our freedom and saved the Union. Here, side-by-side, lie the privates and the generals who defeated fascism and laid the foundation for an American Century. Here lie the Americans who fought through Vietnam, and those who won a long twilight struggle against communism. And here, in Section 60, lie men and women who gave their lives to keep our homeland safe over more than a decade of war in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Early this morning, I returned from Afghanistan. Yesterday, I visited with some of our men and women serving there -- 7,000 miles from home. For more than 12 years, men and women like those I met with have borne the burden of our nation's security. Now, because of their profound sacrifice, because of the progress they have made, we're at a pivotal moment. Our troops are coming home. By the end of this year, our war in Afghanistan will finally come to end. (Applause.) And yesterday at Bagram, and here today at Arlington, we pay tribute to the nearly 2,200 American patriots who've made the ultimate sacrifice in Afghanistan. We will honor them, always.

Today, in small towns across America, in cemeteries throughout our country and around the world, and here on these solemn hillsides, the families of our fallen share stories of the lives they led. Our hearts ache in their absence. But our hearts are also full -- full in knowing that their legacy shines

bright in the people that they loved the most. Through almost unimaginable loss, these families of the fallen have tapped a courage and resolve that many of us will never know. And we draw comfort and strength from their example.

We draw strength from the promise of their children. Today, Michelle and Jill are with 200 brave boys and girls whose parents gave everything they had in service to their country.

They were mothers and fathers like Staff Sergeant Michael Cardenaz, who gave his life in Afghanistan four years ago. The years since have been hard for Michael's family. And yet, with the love of their mother, Macarena, his three youngest daughters have displayed a strength beyond their years.

Mariella, the oldest of the three, has become a mentor to other children who've lost their parents.

Mariliz, the middle girl, was used to her dad carrying her everywhere when she was little; now 7, she shepherds her little sister, Marianna. And Marianna, who was just a baby when her dad was deployed, is starting to understand what it means that her daddy served his country. Mariella, Mariliz, and Marianna are here today. And we say to you -- and to all these courageous children -- your parents' bravery lives on in you. You will never walk alone. Your country will be there to help you grow up into the young men and women your parents always knew you would be. And that's our pledge to you. (Applause.)

We draw strength as well from the love of the spouses of the fallen. Sergeant First Class Joseph Gantt was a young man but already a veteran of World War II when he met Clara Edwards on a train headed to California. He spent two years courting Clara before she finally agreed to marry him.

Then, when Joseph deployed to Korea, he told his young wife to remarry if he didn't come back. She told him no. He had a hard enough time getting her to say yes in the first place, she said. (Laughter.) He had waited two years for her; she'd wait as long as it took for him to come home.

When Joseph went missing in action, Clara waited -- she waited 63 years. Meanwhile, our country continued to work to bring home the missing from all our wars. And then, last December -- last December -- his remains finally identified, Joseph returned home to be laid to rest. Clara never remarried during those 63 years. And now 96 years old, she was there to welcome him home. And we are honored to have Clara Gantt here with us today. Clara. (Applause.)

We also draw strength from the parents who have given their sons and daughters to America.

Earlier this year, in my State of the Union address, I spoke of the remarkable story and grueling recovery of Sergeant First Class Cory Remsburg, who was severely injured by a massive roadside bomb in Afghanistan. And when he stood, there in the balcony, it reminded our entire nation that we are blessed to be protected by patriots like him. But that was only part of the story. Today, I want to

close with the story of Cory's brother-in-arms, Sergeant Roberto Sanchez, who was killed by that same explosion.

Rob wasn't a big guy, but his mother, Wendy, remembers that he was "larger than life" -- always surrounded by friends and melting hearts with a devastating smile. Rob admired the Army from a young age. He dressed up as a soldier the first time he went out for Halloween -- and for many Halloweens after that. He meticulously arranged and rearranged G.I. Joes on his bedroom floor. And when he watched the Twin Towers fall that awful September day, Rob found his calling to serve his country. A proud Army Ranger who took care of his fellow soldiers just as he did his own family, he'd tell Wendy, "Mom...I'm your Superman."

In October 2009, Rob was on his fifth deployment, and Rob and Cory were finishing a mission with their fellow Rangers in Kandahar. And that's when the bomb went off. And that's when this American family made a sacrifice the depths of which few of us will ever truly comprehend.

In the years since, Wendy has dug deep to find the strength to live without Rob. She keeps in touch with Cory, who she finally had a chance to meet and spend some time with this past week -- sharing their memories of Rob. She runs half marathons. She and her husband pour their hearts into raising their youngest son, Logan, who she says wants to be just like Rob -- which she knows means she'll probably send another son into military service.

Today, Wendy is watching this ceremony from home near Indianapolis, on a Memorial Day in America that has been made safe by her son's sacrifice. And every day, when she looks at the old photo of her and Rob that sits on her dresser, she's reminded that although he is gone, he will always inspire her -- and will always be her Superman.

For the parents who have lost a child, for the husbands and wives who've lost a partner, for the children who have lost a parent, this day, and this place, are solemn reminders of the extraordinary sacrifice they have made in our name. But today reminds us as well that for these family [sic] and for their comrades-in-arms, their service to our nation endures. There are few who truly understand what it means to send a child into war, or to watch a battle buddy give his life to save others. On this Memorial Day, and every day, these are the families and veterans we're sworn to look after.

And so here, on these hallowed grounds, we rededicate ourselves to our sacred obligations to all who wear America's uniform, and to the families who stand by them always: That our troops will have the resources they need to do their job. That our nation will never stop searching for those who've gone missing or are held as prisoners of war. That -- as we've been reminded in recent days -- we must do more to keep faith with our veterans and their families, and ensure they get the care and benefits and opportunities that they've earned and that they deserve. These Americans have done their duty.

They ask nothing more than that our country does ours -- now and for decades to come.

(Applause.)

The fallen patriots we memorialize today gave their last full measure of devotion. Not so we might mourn them, though we do. Not so that our nation might honor their sacrifice, although it does.

They gave their lives so that we might live ours -- so that a daughter might grow up to pursue her dreams; so that a wife might be able to live a long life, free and secure; so that a mother might raise her family in a land of peace and freedom. Everything that we hold precious in this country was made possible by Americans who gave their all. And because of them, our nation is stronger, safer, and will always remain a shining beacon of freedom for the rest of the world.

May God bless the fallen and all those who serve. May God watch over their families. And may God continue to bless the United States of America.

END

11:54 A.M. EDT

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