

*"The United States has sent thousands of its fine young men and women into great peril to fight for freedom beyond our borders. The only amount of land we have ever asked for in return is enough to bury those who did not return."*

With these words, General Colin Powell, then our Secretary of State, refuted the charge that the impending assault on the Saddam Hussein Regime would be an act of militarism.

General Powell's polite reminder silenced the room. Perhaps that was because the room was filled with representatives of nations that more than once in recent history had been rescued from tyranny by the sacrifices of American warriors and their families. The General was diplomatic. But he was also direct.

His words were less those of a member of the President's cabinet than they were those of an American warrior who had seen years of service in the field in the Vietnam War.

General Powell's lesson to our allies, for all of its credibility, presents some hard questions. What kind of Nation – what kind of people – send their children into harm's way, even to their deaths, to secure others' freedom? What kind of country accepts the inevitable, tragic consequences of war without conquering?

The question reflects another contradiction — Memorial Day. On this day we remember in solemn graveyard services those who gave their last full measure of devotion on the battlefield. But today is also a day of light-hearted back-yard cook-outs and trips to the beach. I am going to ask you to join me in thinking for a few moments about this contradiction.

But first, I must thank a host of important community leaders for the honor of their presence today:

...

I thank my 12-year old son, Daniel, for helping me with my remarks. Dan listened to my speech at home yesterday afternoon, and then, true to form, he bluntly told me it was too long, too full of details that made it sound like I was reading from an Almanac, that I needed to cut it down. So I did. So, Dan, on behalf of all of these nice people here today, thanks.

And finally, I thank my Division's senior non-commissioned officer, CSM Robert Jenks, the vice commander of Post 178. His invitation to speak has challenged me to work toward an understanding of what this day really means.

Memorial Day started in 1865, when a group of freed slaves commemorated the deaths of Union soldiers who had been interred at a mass grave at a prison camp in Charleston, South Carolina.

In 1968, the US Congress passed a law directing that Memorial Day always fall conveniently on a Monday. The purpose: to create a long weekend to mark the beginning of summer.

Some have argued that using this solemn day to mark the beginning of summer has clouded its true meaning. Those of us who have lost comrades in arms, who have been at the scene and watch them

pass, at times do suffer a bit of heartburn when it seems, at least at the surface, that so many in the country are more caught up with department store sales than remembering the fallen.

For me, Memorial Day recalls Afghanistan in 2008 and Iraq in 2004.

Before we entered Iraq, COL Randall Dragon, commander of the Second Brigade of the First Infantry Division, assembled every one of his company and battalion commanders at lonely spot in the Kuwaiti desert. He told us to break out our notebooks. And he briefed us on his expectations – not those about the approaching tactical movement into the combat zone, or the logistics of sustaining a fighting force of over 7,000 troops. Those details had already been planned, briefed and rehearsed. This talk was about our moral responsibility as commanders. Among other things, he told us, “We are entering a lethal environment. Prepare yourselves and prepare your formations for tragedy. Understand, and make your troopers understand, that when it happens, we are going to evacuate the wounded, recover the dead, continue the mission, and grieve later. Be ready for that.”

Our colonel’s warning faded in the punishing heat of the nine-month Iraqi summer. We patrolled constantly. There were some brief but violent gunfights, an occasional mortar attack, some close calls with roadside bombs. Somehow, we stayed safe, all 140 members of our rifle company.

Now, some years before all of this, back in the 1990s, a young man named Fred Akintade came to the US from Africa. He scored high marks in his computer science studies at the City University of New York. When not studying, he worked at an investment bank, where he was identified as a rising star among his peers.

But Akintade apparently felt something was missing from his new life in America. So he enlisted as an infantryman in the New York Army National Guard. His first day of basic training at Fort Benning, Georgia, was September 11, 2001.

In January 2004, a federal judge traveled to Fort Drum, where we had spent months preparing and training for the war in Iraq. The judge administered the oath of United States citizenship to Akintade. Two days later we boarded a plane and we deployed.

Akintade was not completely sold on the idea of this war in Iraq. Even so, he stood up for every mission. He did so with a smile, often a laugh.

On October 28, 2004, enemy fighters, members of Al Qaeda in Iraq, ambushed the men of my First Platoon as they returned to base from a mission in the desert. The enemy detonated artillery shells buried in the side of the road. They machine-gunned the stalled, disabled column of Humvees. Akintade, manning a machine gun in the turret of a vehicle, did not survive the blast. He died on the spot in a way that was painful and terrible, without any sense of glory, without any obvious battlefield victory for his sacrifice.

After evacuating Akintade’s remains by helicopter, our company began looking for the enemy. Then COL Dragon, our brigade commander who had lectured us in the Kuwaiti desert 9 months before, arrived on the scene.

I walked him through the ambush site. He inspected the wires that the attackers had used to detonate their bombs. He looked at the ground where wads of gauze and IV tubing and field dressing wrappers served as evidence of First Platoon’s struggle to save their brother while under fire.

A wise commander, the colonel said very little. This was not the time or place for a speech. He looked us in the eye. He said, "God Bless You Men," and then left for another place on the battlefield.

Days later I saw our colonel again, on the occasion of the memorial for Akintade at our base. That day I performed my hardest duty as a commander: I delivered a eulogy to Akintade in front of the 800 Soldiers of our task force. I have almost no recollection of reading the words; I was numb. But I am told that I made it through.

Akintade's memorial service ended in the traditional way. A procession of Soldiers – each choking on the lump in his throat – marched up slowly to makeshift memorial – a helmet mounted on a rifle and bayonet buried in the ground. Each Soldier bade SPC Akintade "Godspeed" with a slow, deliberate salute. In silence, some of the Soldiers returned to their posts on the perimeter of our base under a brutal afternoon sun. Others retired to the cool dark concrete bunkers that served as our homes.

An hour after service, the radio in my bunker crackled to life. I was to report to our battalion command post, a mile away, to receive instructions for an imminent mission. I alerted the company and went to receive the order.

An Iraqi citizen had just reported that a cell of enemy fighters had infiltrated a nearby village. Our mission was to remove them. Minutes later, our company sped from the base. En route, we linked up with our allies, the company of Iraqi soldiers that we had trained. We opened communications with the Army pilots orbiting above in Kiowa helicopters; they protected us as we moved to the objective.

And then we attacked. My Soldiers executed the raid with the steady, steely professionalism with which they had been trained and led by my sergeants and junior officers. With violence of action – but without malice, indeed, without firing a shot – my Soldiers overwhelmed the enemy with the speed of their assault. Having achieved surprise, they captured the fighters and recovered their cached weapons. Iraqi troops stayed in the village to protect the people from reprisal by the enemy. The aviators returned to their airfield. We returned to base.

Most people would agree that this 72-hour chapter in the history of Alpha Company saw senseless loss, profound grief, honor, courage, compassion and bravery. With that, I would agree.

Some people might even say that it is a unique series of events about a unique set of Soldiers in a particular place and time.

But with that proposition I would not and do not agree.

What I just described is not unique.

Every name on the Vietnam War Memorial, the name of every American warrior lost in Iraq and in Afghanistan; those of the Rangers and Delta operators killed in Somalia; of every trooper lost in Desert Storm, in the Balkans, and in Operation Just Cause in Panama; of every warrior who fell during Operation Urgent Fury in Grenada, in the terrorist attacks at the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia, aboard USS Cole, and ashore in Lebanon; the names of the reconnaissance pilots shot down over Cuba during the Cuban Missile Crisis; the tens of thousands of names of Americans who fell in the Korean War; the hundreds of thousands killed in action in the First and Second World Wars; the names of the 620,000 lost in the Civil War; all of those lost on all of America's battlefields – and in my estimate that includes the police and firefighters who rushed into the inferno of Ground Zero – every single one of those names belonged and still belongs to the soul of a unique person. A person just like Segun Akintade. A person

just like Private Martin R. Dean of Millerton who served and fell during the Korean War, and whose family has honored us with their presence here today.

Each one was a person who laughed and loved, who had friends and family, who achieved and who made mistakes, who had hopes for the future. Each one was called to duty, served, and gave his or her last full measure of devotion, irrespective of the politics of the day, irrespective of their own opinions.

And in the wake of every single one of those losses, surviving warriors were left to grapple with burden of survival, bringing as it does a strange kind of guilt. "Why Akintade? Why not me?"

And finally, every one of those men and women who never came home left families and friends whose wounds did not, have not and will never completely heal.

The Akintade story is not unique.

This is the horrible reality of war. It is a horrible because the senseless loss that it delivers. It is horrible also because of its seeming inevitability. 23 centuries years ago, the Greek philosopher Plato wrote, "Only the dead have seen the end of war."

Some would side-step this reality on the platform of high-minded right-sounding statements about "war being wrong." Some just ignore it because they are focused on things linked directly to their own personal welfare; that is easy to do in a society that does not demand service of its citizens.

There are even some who pity those of us who have worn the country's uniform – as victims of wrongheaded politicians, as dead-enders who serve for a few bucks, as militarists who somehow like fighting and who after their return to civilian life should be watched because of reportedly violent tendencies.

Rather than feel insulted by such folks, I pity them.

They do not get it.

What such people don't understand, but what lost warriors like SPC Akintade and PVT Dean understood – and what those now on patrol in places like Helmand, and north central Iraq, on the Indian Ocean, over the straits of Hormuz, and under the coastal waters of the Korean peninsula, what they and their families completely understand is this fact: there have always been and there remain countries, groups, movements and people on this earth who despise our open society and who labor to destroy it.

This was true when the tyrant King George sent troops to suppress the new kind of liberty that had taken root in this land.

It was true when the Nation literally ripped itself in two over slavery.

It was true when Hitler, Mussolini and Tojo unleashed their genocidal armies on civilization.

It was true when Stalin and Mao adopted and made more scientific the barbarism of the fascists.

It is true now, as we confront a ruthless enemy, an enemy that despicably invokes God's name for its pernicious ends; that exploits our open society for the very purpose of destroying it; an enemy

whose main weapon is stoking fear and plotting the mass murder of defenseless civilians in places like Baghdad, New York, Kabul, London, Mumbai, Madrid, Bali, Berlin and a hundred other cities around the globe.

Some of freedom's enemies can be contained by diplomacy, law enforcement and economic sanctions.

Others cannot.

By force of arms, we must confront them and take them down.

This was the reality that a young new President recognized at the height of the Cold War. As his first official act, he offered the following words as a warning to oppressors and as a pledge to those seeking freedom:

*"Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty"*

Two decades later, President Reagan restated the imperative that we remain ready to defend our freedom:

*"Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction. We do not pass it to our children in the bloodstream. It must be fought for, protected, and handed on for them to do the same, or one day we will spend our sunset years telling our children and our children's children what it was once like in the United States where people were free."*

Just five months ago, President Obama echoed JFK and Reagan, saying the following:

*"[E]vil does exist in the world. A non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler's armies. Negotiations cannot convince al Qaeda's leaders to lay down their arms. ... [T]he world must remember that it was not simply international institutions - not just treaties and declarations - that brought stability to a post-World War II world. Whatever mistakes we have made, the plain fact is this: the United States of America has helped underwrite global security for more than six decades with the blood of our citizens and the strength of our arms."*

Our Commander-in-Chief restated this inconvenient truth, and offered this reminder of the exceptional nature of American sacrifice, in exchange for the Nobel Peace Prize that he had been handed just moments before.

What a choice faces us. What a choice. We can take the way of freedom but only at the cost of some having to kill and some having to die. Or we can somehow try to avoid fighting, to avoid sacrifice, but in the process we will cede civilization to dictators, tyrants, fanatics, criminals, racists, killers.

The American way, the way that Colin Powell so neatly outlined for some of our friends when they questioned our motives, is to take the tough, hard path of freedom and sacrifice. That was the way that Segun Akintade chose, the way that Martin Dean choose, the way that so many thousands before them and after also chose.

But how does any of this help us understand the inherent tension, the contradiction, of Memorial Day, a day when some visit cemeteries but most just seem to enjoy a carefree day away from the office or classroom, and maybe take advantage of the sales at the mall.

I think that an answer lurks in the words of a very unpopular wartime president. One who during his administration was indicted by the media, Congress and protestors in the streets for being a go-it-alone war-monger. Who was accused of subverting individual liberty to the interests of national security. One who was not always known for his oratorical skills. In an act dismissed at the time as swagger, he went to the front to commemorate the sacrifice of warriors slain in the execution of the orders that he had issued. He used these words:

*We have come to dedicate a portion of this battlefield as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live.*

*It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.*

*But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate—we cannot consecrate—we cannot hallow—this ground.*

*The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract.*

*The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.*

*It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced.*

*It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—*

*... that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom— and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.*

With those 278 words, President Lincoln unlocked for us paradox of Memorial Day and defined our obligation to the fallen. We must remember and honor those who gave the last full measure of devotion. It is fitting and proper to do so by ceremonies, parades and other commemorations. But we fulfill that obligation of remembrance best by working everyday toward perfecting President Lincoln's vision for the Nation, a new birth of freedom. We each to do that in our own way, as defined by our consciences and beliefs, our hopes, skills and limitations, constrained only by the basic, easy obligations of good citizenship.

So it is good to celebrate, to enjoy the fruits of our prosperity.

But it is only right to do so if we remain mindful of the sacrifices of the fallen and the enduring grief of their families.

