Memorial Day Speech for Navy League

Thank you for the invitation to speak today. What a wonderful way to celebrate the lives of so many American heroes.

Memorial Day is a unique holiday in our country.

Originally called Decoration Day, it began officially in 1868 and served as an occasion for relatives and grateful citizens to decorate the graves of those who died in the service of their country.

The tradition was born as a result of the civil war—a time of great acrimony between fellow Americans. But in the years that followed the end of the war, all Americans observed the day and were brought together again in their shared desire to honor their heroes.

As the years past, so too did the weight of this day. Too often, it was seen simply as a day off from work. It marked the beginning of summer, the end of school, or the opening of the local public pool.

But today we are at war.

The reality of the young lives lost in battle is hitting home again every day for each of us, and others like you are gathering across the nation to pay tribute and homage to those who died defending freedom and preserving peace.

As we so often hear, freedom has a price and each generation pays it's due. Today is our day to say thank you to those who foot the bill. To those who have paid the ultimate price—with their lives.

This holiday is no longer about picnics and a short work week; it's a very special day to honor those we have lost.

Certainly those who gave their lives in Afghanistan and Iraq are foremost in our minds; but let's not forget the others—those of you who make up the original greatest generation of World War II, the heroes of the Korean War, the soldiers, sailors and marines who served so valiantly, and sometimes unpopularly, in the Vietnam and First Gulf

War. Let's not forget to honor those who died in Somalia, Grenada, Beirut and the many other locations that have put our sons and daughters in harms way.

In order to properly honor our heroes we must ask ourselves what do we need to do in their memories? What is our responsibility to them?

They gave up entire lives—we owe them more than one day.

In order to pay tribute to them, we must teach others about the sacrifices they made.

Help other generations understand that politics aside, the act of committing yourself to your country and being willing to fight for the freedom of your fellow citizens is among the most noble of endeavors.

Second, each of us must find ways to ensure their legacy endures. We live in a sound bite culture where major events are only good for one news cycle and are too soon forgotten or replaced by another breaking story.

These men and women are worth more than that. Their history deserves telling and re-telling. Find a way in your life, at work, at home—wherever—to keep their memories alive.

And finally, continue to gather together on this day and honor their memories.

Treat Memorial Day with reverence and respect and others will follow your lead.

The Navy League has an unblemished record of standing up for our service members and veterans. Your tireless work has made a difference in the lives of our young men and women serving today. And I know that you can help redefine Memorial Day as a solemn but peaceful holiday that honors our heroes.

So many have given of themselves; so many families have been left behind.

But instead of thinking of their absence with bitterness and heard hearts, we honor them.

We hold up their service to the young people of today and we use their memories as a way to illustrate the power of freedom, the preciousness of the rights we enjoy.

I want to thank all of you in the Navy League for your incredible support of our sailors and Marines.

I know many of you are veterans, many of you lost friends and relatives in combat and by being here today you are keeping their memory alive.

As I struggled to find the words I wanted to share with you today I came upon the words of President Kennedy who said, "A nation reveals itself not only by the men it produces but also by the men it honors, the men it remembers."

Today we honor not only men but also women who have given their lives and we honor them all—equally.

I thank you for the opportunity to speak here today; to show my respect and tribute to the fallen heroes of the many generations of Americans.

We have witnessed again and again the powerful force of freedom and its determination to take root even where there seems to be no hope.

It thrives because of the men and women we honor today.

It grows because they lived and died knowing that freedom is the most precious gift we have.

Thank you very much.