VETERANS DAY

Veteran's Day is a wonderful holiday and celebrated throughout America. From small towns in Indiana and Montana to major cities of New York and Los Angeles, Veteran's Day has relevance to each American family in each town and city in the nation. In each generation, in each family there are those who served their country. It may be a father, a brother, a grandfather or cousin. Or perhaps a mother, a sister, a nephew or niece. It may have been in WWI or WWII, Korea, Vietnam, Iraqi Freedom or operation Desert Storm –but whatever the conflict, whatever the service, the commitment to serve and protect our nation is a commitment of the individual and his or her family.

To best understand and celebrate Veteran's Day, it's important to look to its origin – its history. Veterans' Day evolved from the original celebration of Armistice Day, the end of WWI. On November 11th 1918, the "war to end all wars" itself ended. Considered to be the most savage and far reaching war in human history, the "armistice" which ended WWI was a day of celebration and prayer. On every continent, formal events commemorated this historic moment and celebrations of a day of international peace evolved. It came as no surprise that Armistice Day would evolve into a national holiday that continued to be celebrated year after year. In November of 1919, President Woodrow Wilson issued his Armistice Day proclamation. The last paragraph set the tone for future observances:

"To us in America, the reflections of Armistice Day will be filled with solemn pride in the heroism of those who died in the country's service and with gratitude for the victory, both because of the thing from which it has freed us and because of the opportunity it has given America to show her sympathy with peace and justice in the councils of the nation."

For sixteen years the United States formally observed Armistice Day, with impressive ceremonies at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, where the Chief Executive or his representative placed a wreath. In many other communities, the American Legion was in charge of the observance, which included parades and religious services. At 11 A.M. all traffic stopped, in tribute to the dead, then volleys were fired and taps sounded.

What was a surprise, at least to the generation that experienced WWI, is that this war marked a new beginning in international conflict-- not an end. WWII involved an even greater mobilization of soldiers, sailors, marine and airman in the nation's history. Korea soon followed. With so many new veterans who had little or no association with World War I, the significance of a celebration of an "armistice," which means simply a truce, was lost. Slowly, the holiday that was to commemorate the end of WWI, evolved into a general celebration of all veterans. Leaders of Veterans' groups began to celebrate the original date of November 11 to honor all who had fought in various American wars, not just in World War I. It was in

Emporia, Kansas, on November 11, 1953, that a local veterans' group held the one of the first "unofficial" Veterans' Day celebrations instead of an Armistice Day program observance. Ed Rees, of Emporia, was so impressed that he introduced a bill into the House to change the name of Armistice Day to Veterans' Day.

After this passed, Mr. Rees wrote to all state governors and asked for their approval and cooperation in observing the changed holiday. An Act of Congress changed the name to Veterans' Day on May 24, 1954. In October of that year, President Eisenhower called on all citizens to observe the day by remembering the sacrifices of all those who fought so gallantly, and through rededication to the task of promoting an enduring peace. Thus the celebration of Armistice Day was officially replaced with Veteran's Day and all American veterans of all wars were to be honored.

Yet, there's more to the story. When President Eisenhower, himself a veteran, formally established Veteran's Day as a national holiday – it was to be celebrated on a different day than November 18th. The actual law, the Uniform Holiday Bill signed on June 28, 1968, established four three-day weekends by assigning the celebration of national holidays to a Monday. So, four Mondays were selected to celebrate Washington's Birthday, Memorial Day, Veterans Day, and Columbus Day. This gave federal workers a three-day weekend. Now, of course the intent was to encourage travel and recreation – mini-vacations so to speak – for federal employees. But the result was confusion. Many states did not like the non-traditional celebrations and continued to celebrate the holidays on their original dates. The first Veterans Day under the new law was observed with much confusion on Monday, October 25, 1971.

It's kind of refreshing to realize that patriotism was more important than a three-day weekend. Many veterans and their families honored tradition and kept to the original celebrations – enough so that in 1975, President Gerald R. Ford signed Public Law 94-97 that returned the annual observance of Veterans Day to its original date of November 11, beginning in 1978.

This was universally popular with state legislatures, all of the major service organizations and the American people. And it's important to the meaning of the celebration itself.

Tradition is at the core of the holiday. The tradition of service, the tradition of sacrifice and the tradition of a selfless commitment to the preservation of freedom. Veteran's Day is not a "day off" from work or a sale at the mall. It represents the ultimate sacrifice – for it honors those that not only served their country but gave their lives on behalf of their country.

What does that really mean? It means that each of you in the audience today has the life you have –because of them. Quick simple really. They fought, many died and you and your families are the direct beneficiaries of their sacrifice. The observance of Veteran's Day allows each of us to reflect and focus on the purpose behind such a commemoration. It is a day to celebrate and honor America's veterans.

It is a day to say thank you for their patriotism, their love of their country and most of all, and their willingness to serve and sacrifice for the common good.

So I'd like to take you on a tour with me – a virtual tour – and visit the many war memorials that honor our veterans. Perhaps by visiting these places even though it will be through my words and descriptions, that each of you will have a better understand the importance of this Veteran's Day.

First stop, the newest monument to veterans -- the WWII memorial. As I hope you know the WWII memorial is on the Mall in Washington DC and was dedicated on May 29th of this year. It is placed between the Lincoln Memorial and The Washington Memorial. On what is known as the Announcement Stone the message of the WWII Memorial reads as follows.

HERE IN THE PRESENCE OF WASHINGTON AND LINCOLN, ONE THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY FATHER AND THE OTHER THE NINETEENTH CENTURY PRESERVER OF OUR NATION, WE HONOR THOSE TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICANS WHO TOOK UP THE STRUGGLE DURING

THE SECOND WORLD WAR AND MADE THE SACRIFICES TO PERPETUATE THE GIFT OUR FOREFATHERS ENTRUSTED TO US: A NATION CONCEIVED IN LIBERTY AND JUSTICE.

On flagpoles, the following is carved:

AMERICANS CAME TO LIBERATE, NOT TO CONQUER, TO RESTORE FREEDOM AND TO END TYRANNY

These messages will live for eternity for it was this "Greatest Generation" who literally saved the world. Over 16 million came from farms, from small towns, from large cities, they came to "join up" and fight. They fought on islands in the Pacific and in villages in Europe.

They fought in the desert, in the skies and on mountains throughout the world. And over 400,000 died. The veterans of WWII waited a long time for their legacy to be honored. And the memorial accomplishes the task.

It also honors many who served in specific events or specific roles. These include Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941, with the very famous quote from President Franklin Roosevelt, which reads:

A DATE WHICH WILL LIVE IN INFAMY…NO MATTER HOW LONG IT MAY TAKE US TO OVERCOME THIS PREMEDITATED INVASION, THE AMERICAN PEOPLE, IN THEIR RIGHTEOUS MIGHT, WILL WIN THROUGH TO ABSOLUTE VICTORY.

Many women left their homes to serve on the factory floor, as Rosie the Riveter became the battle cry for housewives to become factory workers. They too are honored with the following:

"WOMEN WHO STEPPED UP WERE MEASURED AS CITIZENS OF THE NATION, NOT AS WOMEN…THIS WAS A PEOPLE'S WAR, AND EVERYONE WAS IN IT." quote of Colonel Oveta Culp Hobby

To those who fought in the battle of Midway – the battle that turned the tide of war in the Pacific, the following words are dedicated:

"THEY HAD NO RIGHT TO WIN. YET THEY DID, AND IN DOING SO THEY CHANGED THE COURSE OF A WAR…EVEN AGAINST THE GREATEST OF ODDS, THERE IS SOMETHING IN THE HUMAN SPIRIT – A MAGIC BLEND OF SKILL, FAITH AND VALOR – THAT CAN LIFT MEN FROM CERTAIN DEFEAT TO INCREDIBLE VICTORY. Quote by Walter Lord, Author

And lastly of D-DAY, the final battle. The words of General George C. Marshall are as follows:

"WE ARE DETERMINED THAT BEFORE THE SUN SETS ON THIS TERRIBLE STRUGGLE OUR FLAG WILL BE RECOGNIZED THROUGHOUT THE WORLD AS A SYMBOL OF FREEDOM ON THE ONE HAND AND OF OVERWHELMING FORCE ON THE OTHER."

The Korean War Memorial is placed to the left of the Lincoln Memorial. Larger than life size bronze statues of a patrol appear in the field, weary, cold and wet with rifles at their sides, and their boots seeming to sink in the mud. The statues depicting fighting men on patrol represent the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force working together for a common goal - victory. A polished granite mural of over two thousand sandblasted photographs seems to gaze at the patrol.

These images honor the supporting services that provided supply, medical, spiritual, and fire support to the frontline units. On the opposite wall, the United Nations wall, lists the countries that provided troops, medical support, or supplies to help South Korea.

These were: Australia, Belgium, Canada, Columbia, Denmark, Ethiopia, France, Greece, India, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Philippines, Republic of Korea, South Africa, Sweden, Thailand, Turkey, United Kingdom, and the United States of America. All point toward the Pool of Remembrance where the sacrifice of 54,246 American lives can be contemplated. It is here where an inscription summarizes the true meaning of the memorial:

"OUR NATION HONORS HER SONS AND DAUGHTERS WHO ANSWERED THE CALL TO DEFEND A COUNTRY THEY NEVER KNEW AND A PEOPLE THEY NEVER MET."

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is the most visited of all landmarks in Washington DC. It consists of three main elements. The Wall, the first part of the memorial to be erected, was dedicated November 13, 1982. There are 58,235 names inscribed on the wall including the names of deceased and missing. The goal of the memorial was to allow all people to reflect on the price of war and to honor those who served. In the fall of 1984, the Three Servicemen Statue, by Fredrick Hart, was placed near the wall. The Vietnam Women's Memorial rounds out the memorial. Designed by Glenna Goodacre, the statue honors all women who served in Vietnam. The Women's Memorial was dedicated on Veterans Day, 1993.

The Marine Corps Memorial honors those Marines who have given their lives in defense of our country since 1775. It is also known as the Iwo Jima Memorial as the statue shows a group of Marines raising the American flag atop Mount Suribachi during the invasion of Iwo Jima in February 1945. The memorial was a replica of the famous picture taken by Joe Rosenthal and was dedicated by President Eisenhower in 1954.

Of course I have to also mention the US Navy Memorial and Naval Heritage Center are located on Pennsylvania Avenue. It was authorized in 1980 by President Carter, himself a former Naval officer, and was dedicated on October 13, 1987. The plaza has a mast and the statue of the Lone Sailor, honoring the men and women who have served in the Navy.

And last, the ultimate symbol to honor our veterans is the Arlington National Cemetery. Overlooking Washington DC, it houses the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, the gravesite of President John F. Kennedy, Arlington House and various memorials as well as being the final resting place of honorably discharged members of the armed services. There are 268,000 persons buried at Arlington, among them Presidents, great national leaders, astronauts and Supreme Court justices.

The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier is guarded around the clock by specially selected members of the US Army 3rd Infantry Regiment (the "Old Guard") based at Fort Myer, Virginia. The changing of the guard occurs every hour during winter and at night and every half hour in summer and during the day. The Tomb has an Unknown Soldier from each of the major wars the US has been a part of in this century: World Wars I and II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War. The Unknown Soldier from World War I, the first to be buried at the Tomb of the Unknown, was interred in 1921 after lying in state in the Capitol Rotunda. The Unknown Soldier from the Vietnam War was disinterred in 1998 when DNA tests proved his identity and the decision was made that the crypt with the remains of the Vietnam Unknown would remain empty.

One of the newer additions at Arlington honors the often-untold role of women in the military services throughout our nations' history. So many moving examples can be found in the special courage of the women who served during the Vietnam War, though they have by no means been the only ones.

The war memorials reflect our need to say thanks – and often to say goodbye. Many veterans never got a chance to say goodbye to buddies over there. Many of us had a family member or friend who on behalf of our service. These monuments, our celebration of Veteran's Day commemorate and honor our service men and women. We are reminded of human costs of war.

I'll close today with two powerful quotes that seem to best summarize the reason be our celebration today. Let me start with President Harry Truman who said:

OUR DEBT TO THE HEROIC MEN AND VALIANT WOMEN IN THE SERVICE OF OUR COUNTRY CAN NEVER BE REPAID. THEY HAVE EARNED OUR UNDYING GRATITUDE. AMERICA WILL NEVER FORGET THEIR SACRIFICES.

And from Admiral Chester W Nimitz.

THEY FOUGHT TOGETHER AS BROTHERS-IN-ARMS. THEY DIED TOGETHER AND NOW THEY SLEEP SIDE BY SIDE. TO THEM WE HAVE A SOLEMN OBLIGATION.