

Memorial Day 2011 Speech
CAF Air Power Museum, Midland, Texas
Monday, May 30, 2010
Congressman K. Michael Conaway

Good Afternoon. It is an honor to be invited back to the Air Power Museum and to again be asked to share a small part in the museum's Memorial Day events.

The first national Memorial Day was proclaimed by General John A. Logan, Commander of the Grand Army of the Republic, to honor the sacrifices made by soldiers on both sides of the Civil War. In his proclamation he laid out the foundations of our Memorial Day celebrations. He wrote:

We should guard their graves with sacred vigilance. All that the consecrated wealth and taste of the Nation can add to their adornment and security is but a fitting tribute to the memory of her slain defenders. Let no wanton foot tread rudely on such hallowed grounds. Let pleasant paths invite the coming and going of reverent visitors and fond mourners. Let no vandalism of avarice or neglect, no ravages of time, testify to the present or to the coming generations that we have forgotten, as a people, the cost of a free and undivided republic.

If other eyes grow dull and other hands slack, and other hearts cold in the solemn trust, ours shall keep it well as long as the light and warmth of life remain in us.

He had hoped that the observance of Memorial Day would continue from year to year, so long as there remained a Civil War veteran to honor the memories of his fallen comrades. Today, it is the service of all the generations of men and women who have given the last full measure of devotion that we remember. It is their willingness to do their duty that enables us to be here today.

As I read the citations of the eight Medal of Honor recipients who will be inducted today, I was struck first by their bravery. Then as I began to imagine myself alongside them, I was struck by their deep understanding of duty and their instinctive belief that their actions mattered. In the face of what lesser men might have considered futility, each of these men persevered. In

whatever particular place they found themselves in, each man understood that he needed to complete the mission, regardless of the hazards.

It is six of these men – Pfc. Oscar P. Austin, Pvt. David B. Barkeley, Maj. Horace S. Carswell, Jr., 2LT Terrence Collinson Graves, S/Sgt. Ambrosio Guillen, M/Sgt. Travis E. Watkins – who we are here to honor today. These six men ultimately gave their lives for their country.

They understood that their actions, even in the unpredictable carnage of war, mattered to their brothers in arms. They knew that the outcome of the battle depended on their mission, the success of the war depended on the battle, and the future of the nation depended on the war.

We highlight the heroic actions of these men, but they are not alone. They march at the head of a column of heroes that stretches back to our nation's founding. Throughout our history, every generation has been blessed to have its defenders and no generation has been spared the need to refresh the Tree of Liberty.

Across our nation, this generation's young men and women have answered the call to arms. They have set their hopes and dreams aside so that you and I might not live in fear. They fight so that those who plot destruction never again get to see their handiwork writ large across our skies.

Today's service members are especially inspiring to me. We have been engaged in two large military operations for close to a decade and the recruits that have signed up understand the threats our nation faces and each one of them has asked for the opportunity to defend us.

When they come home, this day will be a very different day for them than it is to you and me. To these men and women, Memorial Day will be the day when they stop to think of their fallen comrades and take stock of whether or not the sacrifice was worth it. In all that our nation undertakes, let us never let any doubt creep into their minds.

In one of the more famous Memorial Day speeches given, Oliver Wendell Holmes spoke about this day as a veteran of the Civil War. In it, he talked at length about several of the men who he

knew that perished in the War. To him, this day was intensely personal because he knew the dead that his fellow citizens were memorializing.

Most Americans have not lost close friends or family members in this war; for them Memorial Day is an abstraction. For Justice Holmes and our veterans, today is as concrete a day as there can be. Last year, I challenged you to try and make this day a little more personal and a little deeper by remembering a specific individual who died in combat. Last year, I shared the story of Rex Young with you; he is who I think of on this day. This year, I urge you to ask a veteran about the friends he or she lost. Ask a veteran to share with you the courage, sense of duty, and patriotism that their comrades showed.

Celebrated properly, Memorial Day is a solemn day, but it need not be a sad day. Justice Holmes, as he closed his Memorial Day Speech, reminded us that the losses we remember were not in vain.

Some hundred and twenty-five years ago Justice Holmes told his audience:

But grief is not the end of all. I seem to hear the funeral march become a paean. I see beyond the forest the moving banners of a hidden column. Our dead brothers still live for us, and bid us think of life, not death--of life to which in their youth they lent the passion and joy of the spring. As I listen, the great chorus of life and joy begins again, and amid the awful orchestra of seen and unseen powers and destinies of good and evil our trumpets sound once more a note of daring, hope, and will.

As we remember our fallen soldiers today, let us not forget that our brothers and sisters fought and died so that America might endure, and they succeeded! Happy for us that we can meet to recall their lives.

Again thank you for the chance to participate in today's events. I am humbled, as always, by the outpouring of patriotism in West Texas and feel blessed to be able to call you all my friends and neighbors.

As he closed his General Order 11, General Logan gave instructions to his commanders. I leave you with his commands and urge you to do the same as you leave here this afternoon.

Let us, then, at the time appointed gather around their sacred remains and garland the passionless mounds above them with choicest flowers of springtime; let us raise above them the dear old flag they saved from dishonor; let us in this solemn presence renew our pledges to aid and assist those whom they have left among us as sacred charges upon the Nation's gratitude – the soldier's and sailor's widow and orphan.

May God bless our men and women protecting us today and in days past, may He comfort those who endure the pain of loss, and may He never cease to shed his grace on Texas and our United States.

Thank you.

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