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Remarks at a Memorial Day ceremony in Arlington, Virginia

William J Clinton

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Thank you very much, Secretary Cohen, for your remarks, your devotion to your country, and your outstanding leadership. Secretary West, thank you for your work on behalf of our Nation's veterans. And to both of you, thank you for your support of the recent actions in Congress to raise the pay of our military personnel and to improve their quality of life, to improve the retirement systems of the veterans and their readiness.

General Ivany, thank you for your remarks, your example, and your leadership. Colonel Brogan, thank you for your prayers. Superintendent Metzler, thank you for doing such a magnificent job of maintaining Arlington National Cemetery, in honor of those who are buried here and as a tribute to all America stands for. I thank the members of the Cabinet, the Joint Chiefs, Congress, the diplomatic corps, the armed services who are here. I welcome the veterans and the families of veterans and members of the armed services, my fellow citizens.

I'd like to begin by asking that we all join in expressing our thanks to the Air Force Band and the Singing Sergeants for doing such a fine job here today-[applause]-they deserve it. Thank you.

Even though the day is bright and warm I ask you to indulge me, to spend a few extra moments to think about what it means that we here today mark the final Memorial Day of this century. To be sure, it has been a century that saw too many white stones added to these gentle hills, marking America's sacrifices for freedom for over 100 years, in two World Wars and many other conflicts. Again and again, America has been tested in the 20th century, coming through it all, down to the present day, with even greater blessings of liberty and prosperity, with our enduring optimism and steady faith in our common humanity.

Thanks to our brave men and women in uniform, our Nation has never been more secure. Thanks to them, the cold war is now another chapter in the history books. Thanks to them, nations that fought two World Wars in Europe and in Asia, some of which had battled each other for centuries, now cooperate with each other as never before.

On the eve of a new millennium we can see clearly how closely the sacrifices of our men and women in uniform in the 20th century are

linked to the yearning for freedom that gave birth to our Nation over 200 years ago, a yearning based on the then radical premise that we are all inherently equal, fully able to govern ourselves and endowed with a God-given right to liberty. That is our history, a history that beckons us especially on this Memorial Day and especially here at Arlington, the most powerful evidence we now have that our country has accepted consistently the old adage that much is expected from those to whom much is given. From Concord to Corregidor, from Korea to Khe Sanh, from Kuwait to Kosovo, our entire history is written in this ground.

As Secretary Cohen said, only 11 days ago a young man from Ohio, Chief Warrant Officer David Gibbs, was laid to rest here after his helicopter crashed in a training exercise on May 5th in Albania. Chief Warrant Officer Kevin Reichert died in the same crash. We honor these two brave Americans who gave their lives in service to our Nation's highest ideals, joining other, more famous names who did the same. Here lie heroes of war, like John Pershing, George Marshall, Omar Bradley, President Kennedy; the great explorer Robert Peary; brave astronauts who gave their lives to increase our knowledge of the heavens; Medgar Evers, who fought for freedom at Normandy on D-day and then fought for freedom all over again at the University of Mississippi; familiar names, like Joe Louis, Justice Earl Warren, Abner Doubleday, Medal of Honor winner Audie Murphy: all different, all American, all made our presence possible.

We are the oldest constitutional democracy in the world, but we must never forget in the context of human history just how quickly we have come to where we are today. Secretary Cohen quoted another famous American veteran who is buried here, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes. He fought in the Civil War and went on to serve on the United States Supreme Court until he was 93 years old. A young man caught him at the age of 90 reading a copy of Plato's "Republic" and asked whatever in the world he was doing, reading that weighty tome. And he said, "I am doing this to improve my mind."

A remarkable man, Justice Holmes. His life shows us how quickly we have come here. When he was a boy, he shook hands with a veteran of the American Revolution. As a young man he fought in the Civil War, where he was visited by President Lincoln. You may know the famous story that the President was wearing his trademark stovepipe hat, and he began, because he was so tall, to attract fire from the Confederate forces, until Holmes shouted, without thinking, these famous words, "Get down, you fool." [Laughter] Lincoln replied, "I'm glad you know how to talk to a civilian." [Laughter]

Justice Holmes lived through World War I and the Depression. He watched the United States assume the mantle of leadership. And he always remembered what he had done as a young man-that war reminds us, and I quote, that "our comfortable routine is no eternal necessity of things." He understood that our freedom had been and always would be bought by men and women ready to protect it, sometimes at great cost and peril.

So we did not become a great nation just because the land was generous to those who settled it, though it was; just because the people who came here worked hard and were clever and resourceful, though surely our forebears were. We became a great nation also because every time our beliefs and ideals have been threatened, Americans have stepped forward to defend them. From our biggest cities to our smallest towns, citizens have done what had to be done to advance the dream that began on the Fourth of July in 1776–always following Justice Holmes' famous admonition that we must be involved in the action and passion of our time, for fear of being judged not to have lived.

So my fellow Americans, if today is a day for history, it is also a day to honor those who lie here and in countless other places all across the world in marked and unmarked graves, to honor them by looking to the future; to rededicate ourselves to another 100 years of our liberty, our prosperity, our optimism, and our common humanity.

Today, there is a new challenge before us in Kosovo. It is a very small province in a small country, but it is a big test of what we believe in: our commitment to leave to our children a world where people are not uprooted and ravaged and slaughtered en masse because of their race, their ethnicity, or their religion; our fundamental interest in building a lasting peace in an undivided and free Europe, a place which saw two World Wars when that dream failed in the 20th century; and our interest in preserving our alliance for freedom and peace with our 18 NATO Allies.

All of us have seen the hundreds of thousands of innocent men and women and children driven from their homes, the thousands singled out for death along the way. We have heard their stories of rape and oppression, of robbery and looting and brutality. And we saw it all before, just a few years ago, in Bosnia, for 4 long years, until NATO acted, combining with the resistance of Bosnians and Croatians, to bring the Dayton peace agreement and to turn the tide of ethnic cleansing there.

How did this all happen? Well, 10 years ago the Berlin Wall fell, ending communism's cruel and arbitrary division of Europe, unleashing the energies of freedomloving people there, after two World Wars and the cold war, to be united in peace and freedom and prosperity. But that same year in Serbia, Slobodan Milosevic became the last holdout against a Europe free, united, and at peace, when he stripped away the rights of the Kosovars to govern themselves. He then went to war against the Croatians and the Bosnians. And in the wake of that, after 4 years, a quarter of a million people were dead, 21/2 million people were refugees, many of them still have not gone home. There was a stunning record of destruction, told not only in lives but in religious, cultural, historical, and personal buildings and records destroyed in an attempt to erase the existence

of a people on their land.

In Kosovo we see some parallels to World War II, for the Government of Serbia, like that of Nazi Germany, rose to power in part by getting people to look down on people of a given race and ethnicity, and to believe they had no place in their country, and even no right to live. But even more troubling, we see some parallels to the rumblings all around the world where people continue to fall out with one another and think they simply cannot share common ground and a common future with people who worship God in a different way or have a slightly different heritage.

Think about the contrast of that to the military we celebrate today. Every morning on Memorial Day, I have a breakfast for leaders of the veterans community at the White House. And I stand there with eager anticipation as people who have fought or whose relatives have fought and often died in our wars come through the line. I noticed them today: There were Irish-Americans and Italian-Americans; there were Arab-Americans and Jewish Americans; there were Catholic Americans and Protestant Americans; there were African-Americans, there were Hispanic-Americans, there were Asian-- Americans.

Just look around here today at the kinds of people who are wearing the evidence of their service to our country. We are a stronger country because we respect our differences, and we are united by our common humanity. Now, we cannot expect everybody to follow our lead, and we haven't gotten it entirely right, now. We don't expect everybody to get along all the time. But we can say no to ethnic cleansing. We can say no to mass slaughter of people because of the way they worship God and because of who their parents were. We can say no to that, and we should.

It is important that you know that in Kosovo the world has said no. It's not just the United States or even just our 18 NATO Allies with us. People on every continent-- Arabs and Israelis are sending assistance, Protestants and Catholics from Northern Ireland; Greeks and Turks; Africans, Asians, Latin Americans; even those whose own lives have been battered by hurricanes and other natural disasters and who have hardly anything to give are sending help, because their hearts have been broken and their consciences moved by the appalling abuses they have seen.

Our objectives in Kosovo are clear and consistent with both the moral imperative of reversing ethnic cleansing and killing, and our overwhelming national interest in a peaceful, undivided Europe which will ensure we will not have to send large numbers of young Americans to die there in the next century in a war. The objectives are that the Kosovars will go home; the Serb forces will withdraw; an international force, with NATO at its core, will deploy to protect all the people, including the Serb minority, in Kosovo. And afterward, to avoid future Bosnias and future Kosovos, we will learn the lesson of the Marshall plan and what we did for Eastern Europe

after the Berlin Wall fell, by working with our European Allies to build democracy and prosperity and cooperation in southeastern Europe so that there will be stronger forces pulling people together than those that are driving them apart.

I know that many Americans believe that this is not our fight. But remember why many of the people are laying in these graves out here--because of what happened in Europe and because of what was allowed to go on too long before people intervened. What we are doing today will save lives, including American lives, in the future. And it will give our children a better, safer world to live in.

In this military campaign the United States has borne a large share of the burden, as we must, because we have a greater capacity to bear that burden. But all Americans should know that we have been strongly supported by our European Allies, that when the peacekeeping force goes in there, the overwhelming majority of people will be European, and that when the reconstruction begins, the overwhelming amount of investment will be European. This is something we have done together.

And I ask you, in the days and nights ahead, to remember our brave pilots and crews flying over Serbia, to keep their families in our thoughts. I visited with them recently. I know that they risk their lives every day, and they even avoid firing back sometimes at people who fire at them because they fire from heavily populated areas, and they want to avoid killing innocent civilians.

I ask you to support all possible efforts to relieve the suffering of the people of Kosovo. Even those who escape will be struggling with what happened to them for a long, long time. And this afternoon, I ask all Americans to join with those who have urged us to engage in a moment of remembrance at 3 o'clock eastern daylight time, in honor of those who have given their lives for our country.

I also ask all Americans to honor, along with those who have given their lives for our freedom, the living symbol of American valor, our veterans and their families, the present members of armed services and their families, wherever and however they serve.

How fitting it is that we are standing against ethnic cleansing with our wonderful, myriad, rainbow, multiethnic military in our increasingly diverse society that involves both the strength of our differences and the even more powerful pull of our shared American values. Our military inspires the world with their respect for one another and their ability to work together. And you pass every test with the same flying colors, red, white, and blue.

Those who lie in this sacred place and in all those other places

the world over, many of whom will never even be known, they would be very proud of today's men and women in uniform. And in the bright new century ahead, those who live free with pride in and without fear of their heritage or their faith will be very grateful to today's men and women in uniform.

I thank you all. God bless you, and God bless America.