

Remarks at the Armed Forces Farewell Salute in Camp Springs, Maryland

January 12, 1989

Thank you all very much. And I express the thanks of my roommate, who unfortunately is ill and has no voice, tried to get up and get here, and I sent her back to bed.

It's been my responsibility, my duty, and very much my honor to serve as Commander in Chief of this nation's Armed Forces these past 8 years. That is the most sacred, most important task of the Presidency. Since our nation's founding, the primary obligation of the national government has been the common defense of these United States. But as I have sought to perform this sacred task as best I could, I have done so with the knowledge that my role in this day-to-day-to-day effort, from sunrise to sunrise, every moment of every hour of every day of every year, is a glancing one compared to yours.

Yes, today America is at peace, today her defenses are strong, and she stands proud and tall in the sight of the world. And the credit, the gratitude of a nation comfortable and at peace, properly goes not to me but rather to all of you. For you have, of your own free and true good will, chosen to spend all or part of your lives in service to your country and your countrymen.

We live in an age of great prosperity and ease, a time when many people your age are getting themselves established in the world in circumstances of comfort that would astonish your ancestors. You have chosen a different path, a path of service to country and to others rather than to self. You have made yourselves a shining example of how men and women can find within themselves qualities of self-sacrifice, bravery, camaraderie, and true courage. These are many of the noblest virtues to which humankind can aspire. They are martial virtues. You have made the comfortable lives of your fellow Americans possible by taking on these responsibilities by choice. And over the past 8 years, the luster has been restored to the reputation of our fighting forces after a time during which it was shamefully fashionable to deride and even condemn service such as yours. Those days will never come again.

But it's not just your fellow Americans who owe you a debt. No, I believe many more do, for I believe that military service in the Armed Forces of the United States is a profound form of service to all humankind. You stand engaged in an effort to keep America safe at home, to protect our allies and interests abroad, to keep the seas and the skies free of threat. Just as America stands as an example to the world of the inestimable benefits of freedom and democracy, so too an America with the capacity to project her power for the purpose of protecting and expanding freedom and democracy abroad benefits the suffering people of the world.

Some might consider those words somewhat controversial, but to them I just say this: Just ask the freedom-loving people of Grenada whether American military power is a good thing or not. Because we remained strong, because we acted when we believed we had to, in the past 8 years not one inch of ground on this Earth fell under Communist control. We cannot name the tens of millions who have been saved from that fate, so we cannot ask them. Rather ask those unfortunate enough to have lived under communism. Ask them whether America should be strong. Ask them whether America should stand tall. Ask them. You don't have to. You know the answer.

You were and are willing to fight and die for America and for freedom and democracy. And some have—595, to be exact, over these past 8 years—some have died. They're not with us today because they're at God's right hand. In the air and on the seas, in battle or as victims of terrorism, they gave their lives while in the service of their country, while representing us and defending what we hold dear. They volunteered. They chose to serve. They gave their lives. They are our heroes. I have seen the faces of those who served with them and those who commanded them, and I know the truth of the old maxim that there is none who hates war as much as he who knows it well; none who knows as well how agonizingly high are its costs, how agonizing are its losses. And I would like to ask right now that we observe a moment of silence in memory of those we have lost.

Amen.

In 1773 [1783], at the end of the arduous War of Independence, George Washington took his final leave of the armies that had set America free and painted in eloquent words a noble portrait of the American Armed Forces that describes them—and the society as a whole, I might add—to this very day. "For who," he said, "has before seen a disciplined army form'd at once from such raw materials. Who could imagine that the most violent local prejudices would cease so soon, and that men who came from the different parts of the continent, strongly disposed to despise and quarrel with each other, would instantly become but one patriotic band [band] of brothers, or who, that was not on the spot, can trace the steps by which such a wonderful revolution has been effected, and such a glorious period put to all our warlike toils?"

Who, indeed. Where, I have at times asked myself, where do you all come from? How have you managed to cohere into the crack, disciplined, patriotic brand [band] of brothers I see before me this morning? Well, the answer's simple. You come from the southwest and the northeast, from the Rockies and the Adirondacks, from the inner cities and the most remote of farms. You come from America, and you are America's pride. And on behalf of all America, I thank you and pray God that He may bless you now and forever.
God bless you all, and thank you.

Note: The President spoke at 11:53 a.m. in the Air Force One complex at Andrews Air Force Base. Prior to his remarks, the President participated in a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the opening of the new complex.

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