

Excerpts from Remarks at the Erath County Memorial Day Observance, East End Cemetery's Field of Honor, May 25, 2009

Ladies and gentlemen, it is a great honor to be part of this occasion. I thank the Turnbow-Higgs American Legion Unit 240 for inviting me. And I join our neighbors and friends in thanking our veterans for your service to our country.

My father is a World War II Navy veteran who served aboard the USS Sigsbee in the Pacific Theater of the war. One of my greatest honors was to walk through the streets of Washington, D.C. with him when the World War II Memorial was dedicated and see people reaching out to shake his hand and thanking him for his service. I have gone with him to Sigsbee reunions. Each time, I am reminded of the devotion and dedication, courage and sacrifice of the men and women of our armed forces.



Across this country today, there are parades and picnics, flyovers and color guards, banners waving from front porches, flowers placed on monuments, and flags marking graves. Today, at this Field of Honor, we salute fallen soldiers who, in Lincoln's words, "gave the last full measure of devotion."

Memorial Day was first observed in May 1868, some three years after the end of the Civil War. On that occasion in Arlington National Cemetery, our 20th president, James A. Garfield – then a US Representative – said of the fallen:

“We do not know one promise these men made, one pledge they gave, one word they spoke; but we do know they summed up and perfected, by one supreme act, the highest virtues of men and citizens.”

More than 140 years later, we hear, in Garfield's words, a call to action. We are reminded that, as citizens, with our rights come responsibilities. We are called to live the values on which this nation was founded, the values for which so many have given so much.

Today there are American servicemen and women in harm's way. As grateful citizens, we pray for their safety. Here at home, we honor their service with ours, as volunteers, as good neighbors, as friends, as compassionate members of the human family. At this time of challenge for so many families, the people of this community are answering the call to care. They are willing to share and to sacrifice for the benefit of others. There is a renewed focus on the fundamental strengths of family and the bonds of community.

Today, we recommit to helping those close by and around the world who yearn for justice and freedom. We celebrate the opportunities we have. And together, we express our gratitude to the men and women of the armed forces for guaranteeing our way of life.

The poet Longfellow said of “Decoration Day”:

All is repose and peace.

The shouts of battle cease.

...

Yours has the suffering been.

The memory shall be ours.

On this Memorial Day and all days, we will always remember.