

Memorial Day, 1965

Address by Donald E. Johnson, National Commander, The American Legion, At Fort Dodge, Iowa, May 31, 1965.

My fellow Americans:

We gather once more on this annual observance of Memorial Day to honor the sacred memory of our nation's heroic dead, and to pledge ourselves anew to the principle that they shall not have died in vain.

How we need to remember their bravery, their courage, their sacrifice, that we may take from them the inspiration to dare to live today for the principles and the ideals for which they died.

Our honored dead, who in the prime of life, dared to lay their lives upon the altar of freedom did in that same act pass on to us the torch of liberty and in so doing they expressed in us their confidence that we would forever hold it high.

Countless tears have been shed, deathless eulogies spoken and tender, loving prayers offered at the final resting places of those who sleep the eternal sleep beneath land and sea, yet time and space are slow to heal the void in the lives of those who mourn a loved one who made the supreme sacrifice.

While memory lingers for those who suffered personal loss, and for those of us who shared their burden of battle but were spared our lives, we find unfortunately that memory is a fleeting thing to so many who knew no personal loss, and to them this day should ever serve as a reminder that our heritage of freedom was dearly won and has been dearly held.

Since the founding of the Republic nearly one hundred

and ninety years ago, more than a million young Americans have laid down their lives that you and I might live in freedom and in peace.

Yet, on this Memorial Day, 1965, nearly a century after the first formal observance of Memorial Day, we find only a portion of that objective accomplished — we live in freedom, but we do not live in peace.

This very day the foes of freedom make a mockery of peace and are once more testing the will of the free world, and particularly the will of the American people, to see if we hold fast to our beliefs that freedom is worth the price.

I have just returned from Vietnam where freedom today faces its most severe test. I have had the privilege of talking with some of today's American fighting men who man the ramparts of freedom in that remote quarter of the globe. I am proud of what I have seen and heard, for here are young Americans with a purpose, with a sense of duty, and an understanding of the necessity for performing that duty and performing it well.

They know that they now represent the first line of defense against the forces that would destroy freedom, and they know the importance of holding that line. The alternative, and they know this too, is to abandon all of Southeast Asia to the forces of aggression and to endanger the Philippines, Nationalist China, Japan and South Korea.

I prefer to believe that here we find the true spirit and character of the rising generation of Americans, for it is a reflection of the spirit of those whom we honor in these Memorial Day ceremonies. They are young Americans with a sense of patriotic duty. They are young Americans who pride themselves in the heritage that is theirs. They are young Americans who love freedom enough to pay the price of defending it. They are young Americans who are worthy heirs of those whom we honor today.

These young men want and deserve the wholehearted support of the American people in the cause the American people have sent them to serve. They are, in reality, fighting for the very same ideals and principles for which every generation of Americans has fought since George Washington led his ragged Continental Army to victory in the war for American independence.

They fight your fight and mine. They fight for the bearded beatnik who lacks a sense of direction. They fight for the undecided Senator who isn't sure whether or not we should be in Vietnam or what we should be doing there.

They fight for the fuzzy-minded professor who contributes to the confusion of his students by conducting "teach-ins" in protest of the American presence in Vietnam and, with a sense of abject defeatism, call for our withdrawal. They fight for all of these who, at the moment, are contributing nothing constructive to the cause of freedom and who, by their obstructionist tactics, may well be making the job of our fighting men more difficult by encouraging the enemy to greater effort.

We may be eternally thankful that the confusion and indecision which exists on the home front does not exist on the battle front, and it is precisely because of conditions such as this that The American Legion considers the proper observance of our patriotic holidays to be so vitally important. In paying tribute to our nation's hero dead we, the living, become their voice to our contemporaries, and we believe it to be our responsibility to carry on their work and advance it to the best of our abilities.

Their final act was to give their all in the seemingly never-ending struggle for liberty, for justice and for peace. The only fitting memorial we can build to them is an America united in the causes for which they died — an America strong and brave, an America forever free.

Americans never have faltered in their march toward this destiny and, God willing, Americans will not falter now. If Americans could sustain in time of peace the standards of heroism which they have achieved in time of war, I believe the long cherished dream of a just and lasting peace on earth might by now be a reality.

The message of those million American heroes whom we honor this day thunders across this land to all of the living imploring us to be heroic in time of peace that we may not again be forced to the heroism that is born of war.

Let all Americans listen today and take new hope, stronger faith and firmer resolve from the words of an anonymous author who wrote of Memorial Day:

"It is a day of memories, a day when we meet in the hallowed past and hold communion with our holy dead. A day when we recall the glorious aspirations which thrilled men's souls in that heroic time, when to love one's country was to lay down one's life; a day filled with that same spirit of freedom, patriotism and devotion which breathed into the common dust of ordinary humanity the sublime inspiration of heroic deeds."