

MEMORIAL DAY SPEECH – 2019

Given by: 1st Vice Commander Fred Mitchell, CAPT USN (Retired)

Good evening Veterans, family and friends of Veteran's, friends of the community and fellow patriots. I feel honored to be speaking with you today, the eve of Memorial Day when we honor those Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Marines who paid the ultimate price for the freedoms we enjoy in this country. When I was preparing my remarks for this commemoration today, I found it challenging and daunting because I was thinking, "what could I possibly tell a group of Veteran's, their families and friends about the importance of observing Memorial Day that they don't already know?" I thought of it like the old adage of "the minister preaching to the proverbial choir." I need not tell you the importance of Memorial Day and why we honor it, so I won't. Rather, I want to talk about why veteran organizations such as the American Legion should be involved and take the lead on observances such as Memorial Day and Veteran's Day. I also would like to talk to you about how Veterans and other patriotic organizations need to be vigilant and to serve as a reminder for all Americans that the freedoms we enjoy are not free – indeed, freedom comes at a substantial price. That is why we have gathered here today – to honor those have paid the price for our freedom.

We must still, however, be ever vigilant as threats to our freedoms are real and they are relentless. As General Douglas MacArthur once said, "No man is entitled to the blessings of freedom unless he be vigilant in its preservation." We must remain vigilant.

Now, if someone were to ask you, what is the biggest threat to our freedom, how would you respond? Everyone seems to have an opinion as to what is the greatest threat to freedom and democracy

in America. Some say it is the Russians attempting to sway our elections; others might say it is the North Korean regime of Kim Jung Un. Still others may have the opinion that the greatest threat to American democracy and freedom is terrorist organizations such as Al Qaeda and ISIS. I even heard one gentleman argue that the greatest threat to our freedom and democracy is the dysfunctionality between congress and the white house. While we must be ever watchful of these nations and organizations I just mentioned, I submit to you that the greatest threat to our democracy is our own apathy and that is what I want to talk about with you today.

While researching points for my remarks, I ran across some interesting writings and opinions on democracy offered by a Scottish gentleman named Alexander Tytler who was a judge and historian who lived in the 1800's. Mr. Tytler surmised that democracy cannot exist as a permanent form of Government. He further opined that long-standing democracies normally last about 200 years and run through the following cycle: First the country is in bondage; bondage leads to spiritual faith; spiritual faith leads to liberty; liberty leads to abundance; abundance leads to selfishness; selfishness leads to apathy; apathy leads to dependence; and dependence leads back to bondage. While I don't necessarily agree with all of this gentleman's opinions, I found his comments intriguing especially because we both found apathy to be a threat to democracy.

I want to take you back in history a bit. While I could start with the Revolutionary War, Civil war and WWI, I want to keep my remarks relatively short today. But please do not take this as disrespect to those braves souls who paid the ultimate price in those wars as well. Their contributions to America and the freedoms we enjoy have not been nor will they ever be overlooked.

So now let's go back in history starting with the events that led to America's involvement in WWII. We all know what happened on December 7, 1941 when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. Shortly thereafter, Adolf Hitler declared war on the United States. After four-plus years of fighting we declared victory in the European Theater against the Third Reich and in the Pacific against the Empire of Japan. Patriotism in America was at an all-time high. Our warriors came home to a hero's welcome. The national ensign -- the American flag -- waived prominently and proudly throughout America and around the world. The American Flag became a symbol of the victory over our enemies; the American Flag was the symbol of freedom; and that same American Flag, most importantly, draped over hundreds of thousands of American coffins, symbolizing the substantial cost of victory and freedom and the men and women who paid the price for them. Patriotism was at an all-time high.

So, now let's fast forward a bit, to the Korean War and the conflict in Vietnam -- less popular wars -- wars that did not sit well with the American people, especially the Vietnam war which sparked heated protests throughout the land. While every veteran would acknowledge that the right to peaceful protest is incumbent in our freedoms, these protests were many times not peaceful in nature and oftentimes disrespectful to our symbol of freedom and the men and women who died to win that freedom. I can remember the picture of a famous actress sitting and smiling in an enemy anti-aircraft gun emplacement during the height of the war. I am sure many of you remember images of Americans burning the American Flag as a sign of protest. Less than 20 years earlier America was enjoying her finest hour by defeating two separate enemies in different parts of the world -- our flag stood for freedom and the heroes that died for that freedom. That same flag

less than 20 years later, was being defiled, desecrated, and became the symbol of apathy for those who chose to forget the heroes who died to give them their freedom. FDR said it best: Those who have long enjoyed such privileges as we enjoy forget in time that men have died to win them.” It is incumbent on veteran’s organizations and true American patriots to never let America forget.

American Patriotism the next few decades ebbed and flowed with the Cold War and Operation Desert Storm. On September 11, 2001, however, American patriotism would again soar when Al Qaeda committed acts of terrorism on our own soil. Our troops went off to Afghanistan to combat the forces of evil who threatened our freedom. Again, American patriotism was arguably the highest it had been since WWII. While we still have a little work left to do in Afghanistan, the terrorist organization known as Al Qaeda has been pretty much eradicated, but just like the decades that followed WWII, American Patriotism post 9-11 is also waning. In September 2001, we cheered our troops as they left for Afghanistan and cheered even harder when they returned. Now less than 18 years removed, we have atheist organizations attempting to remove a WWI monument, the Peace Cross, that has stood for 93 years. It makes no difference to them that this monument was constructed to honor warriors killed in battle during WWI. We have professional football players who cannot be bothered to stand for the national anthem and the presentation of our nation’s colors. Apathy? If you really think about it, the disrespectful conduct exhibited by these NFL players, like the Vietnam protests in burning the Flag, transcends apathy: this is hypocrisy. Think about it – by burning the American Flag and by showing blatant disrespect by refusing to stand for the National Anthem and the presentation of the colors, they are desecrating and

disrespecting the very symbol of freedom that empowers them to peacefully protest and then they hide behind its protections when their actions are called into question or ridiculed. That's hypocrisy, not apathy. Please understand, I am not questioning NFL players right to do what they did, nor do I question anyone's right to burn the American Flag as the Supreme Court has deemed this freedom of speech. But just because you have the right to do something doesn't mean it's the right thing to do. Liberty – Abundance – Selfishness – Apathy – Hypocrisy, maybe Mr. Tytler was on to something!

In closing, I challenge all Veteran organizations and American patriots to proactively serve as a reminder to the American people that our flag which symbolizes the freedoms we enjoy does not fly because the wind moves it; it flies with the last breath of each American who died protecting it. We must protect the memories of the fallen and monuments like the WWI Peace Cross. We must remain vigilant and continue the fight of our fallen comrades. We must keep their fight alive.

Tomorrow we honor every Soldier, Sailor, Airman and Marine of all wars who gave their last breath to protect our freedoms. Tomorrow, we honor every American who fell in battlefields across the globe and on the oceans and high seas. While we will be hosting a dinner here at the Post this Saturday commemorating the 75th anniversary of D-Day, tomorrow let us honor the real heroes of D-Day – the men who never it off the beach! May God bless you and your families and continue to bless this great nation know as the United States of America.