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In Memory of Those Who Died for Freedom's Cause

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I have remembered all this so vividly as I recently visited the new World War II Memorial in the nation's capital. This magnificent new structure lies on the nation's Mall between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument. As a national commemoration, the memorial is long over due. The memorial is an eloquent statement of a debt yet unpaid, and it will serve the nation well—reminding succeeding generations that freedom is often secured only at the cost of human lives laid down in battle.

The World War II Memorial will be dedicated this weekend, as President George W. Bush will be joined by other national leaders in a special service of commemoration and remembrance. Thousands of participants are expected to attend the event, and millions of others will observe the dedication by television broadcast.

Architect Friedrich St. Florian designed a memorial that fits its context, even as it tells the magnificent story of America's struggle and victory in World War II. The Memorial is laid out as an oval, with two great arches anchoring the design, representing the Atlantic and Pacific theatres of operation. The arches then expand into a pavilion featuring fifty-six granite pillars celebrating the nation's unity during the war. The pillars are connected by a bronze sculpted rope that is intended to symbolize the bonding of the nation. Great wreaths decorate the pillars, even as the pavilion stretches out to tell the story of the war.

At the center of the Memorial is a great plaza, featuring a "rainbow pool" with fountains. The motion of water and the rustling of flags makes the Memorial seem alive with action. This is a public space that invites walking and communicates largeness of space—appropriate for a site dedicated to those who fought in history's most far-flung military conflict.

The story of the war is told through a series of twenty-four bronze bas relief panels along entrance balustrades. A sense of enduring patriotism is provided by the flags framing the ceremonial entrance to the memorial, and the service seals of the Army, Navy, Marine Corp, Army Air Forces, Coast Guard, and Merchant Marines that decorate the bases. "Americans came to liberate, not to conquer, to restore freedom and to end tyranny," the base inscriptions read.

The most moving area of the memorial is a field of four thousand sculpted gold stars embedded on the "Freedom Wall," that commemorates the more than 400,000 Americans who gave their lives during World War II. During the war, the Gold Star in the front window meant that a family member was serving in the conflict. These thousands of stars represent those who never came home, but must never be forgotten.

My visit to the World War II Memorial came just as the facility was opened to the public. A rain shower had just passed through Washington as I walked to the Memorial and stood on its gleaming granite surfaces, joined by hundreds of others who had also made their way to this place of memory and reflection. Elderly men wearing caps and jackets with unit insignia stood throughout the Memorial, standing in silent reflection. These were the men who had fought the war,

and each one of them represented thousands of others who died, either on the battlefields of the massive conflict, or in the decades since the war came to its conclusion.

All of these men are now old, having lived for more than half a century after their generation's greatest challenge had been faced. Many walked with canes; yet others sat in wheelchairs. Groups of veterans walked together from one pole of the memorial to the other, sharing moments of quiet reflection, even as they were reminded of that war's horrible reality.

The great Atlantic and Pacific theatres of operation ranged across the globe. The names of the battles, now inscribed on fountain copings, tell the story. Included in the memorial are references to battles embedded in the nation's memory. The inscriptions include references to the battles of China, Burma, India, the Southwest Pacific, Central Pacific, and North Pacific. Other battles in the Pacific theatre included Pearl Harbor, Wake Island, Bataan, Corregidor, Coral Sea, Midway, Guadalcanal, New Guinea, Buna, Tarawa, Kwajalein, Attu, Saipan, Tinian, Guam, Philippine Sea, Peleliu, Leyte Gulf, Luzon, Manila, Iwo Jima, Okinawa, and Japan.

Commemorated on the northern fountain copings are the battles fought in the Western theatre, including the battles of North Africa, Southern Europe, Western Europe, and Central Europe. Also mentioned are the battles of the Atlantic, Murmansk Run, Tunisia, Sicily, Salerno, Anzio, Rome, Po Valley, Normandy, St. Lo, Alsace, Rhineland, Huertgen Forest, Battle of the Bulge, Remagen Bridge, and the Battle of Germany. The Air War over Europe is also designated as an honored memory.

Those references to battle may mean little to some born in recent years, but they harken back to a time when Americans sat anxiously by the radio, waiting to hear how the battles had turned—waiting to hear if freedom would be secured.

The twentieth century was largely framed by the two great world wars that stand, as historian Eric Hobsbawm has observed, as two gigantic mountain ranges spanning the century. World War I was to be the “War to End all Wars,” but that was not to be. Many modern historians now view the two world wars as one, with the years between considered something of an intermission.

When the instruments of surrender were signed by the Japanese government on the deck of the U.S.S. Missouri in Tokyo Bay, General Douglas MacArthur declared the arrival of peace. “Today the guns are silent. A great tragedy has ended. A great victory has been won. The skies no longer rain death—the seas bear only commerce—men everywhere walk upright in the sunlight. The entire world is quietly at peace.”

Sadly, it was not to last. There can be no hiding from history. A great nation must be defended by a great army and its citizens must be strengthened by a firm resolve. Freedom is among the most costly of possessions, and that price must be paid again in each generation.

The philosopher John Stuart Mill understood this truth very well. “War is an ugly thing,” he observed, “but not the ugliest of things; the decayed and degraded state of moral and patriotic feeling which thinks nothing is worth war is much worse. A man who has nothing for which he is willing to fight; nothing he cares about more than his personal safety; is a miserable creature who has no chance of being free, unless made and kept so by better men than himself.”

When President Harry Truman honored the casualties of World War II, he spoke to the nation with these words: “Our debt to the heroic men and valiant women in the service of our country can never be repaid. They have earned our undying gratitude. America will never forget their sacrifices.” We must make it our business to see this pledge honored in our own generation. The new World War II Memorial is a good start.

