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Remarks Honoring Fallen South Carolina Firefighters

Columbia, SC
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To paraphrase President Lincoln, *“The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here... from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion — that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain.”*

At the US Fallen Firefighters Memorial in Emmitsburg Maryland, there is a Roll of Honor. I have been there many times. As a firefighter, a fire chief, head of the US Fire Administration and as an American proud of the men and women who gave everything to protect their communities and thankful for their service. I have lost firefighters under my command. I have seen the children of the fallen, their families and their comrades. I have cried with them. I cry with them still.

Sadly, we now add to the Roll of Honor the names: Billy Hutchinson, Mike Benke, Louis Mulkey, Mark Kelsey, Brad Baity, Michael French, Earl Drayton, Brandon Thompson and Melvin Champaign.

These men had more than 125 years of service among them. Each was dedicated to Charleston and to protecting all our families. They paid the ultimate price for their dedication. Our words seem almost inconsequential besides their actions. When President Lincoln spoke those moving words over 110 years ago, he was a speaking of a different kind of struggle, but the struggle of those we honor today and all of our nations firefighters battle every day is no less worthy of our respect.

In their memory, we rededicate our efforts to supporting first responders across this nation and around the world. Long ago we considered firefighter fatalities part of the job. Today we know that training and equipment, when matched with the courage of individuals, can reduce risks and bring more of our boys and girls home each night. I look forward to the day when we cease to lose our bravest and brightest in these tragedies and that someday *Everyone Goes Home*.

Let me simply conclude with the Firefighters Prayer – for these brave men, and for all who serve:

Fire Fighter's Prayer

When I am called to duty, God wherever flames may rage,
give me strength to save a life, whatever be its age.

Help me to embrace a little child before it's too late,
or save an older person from the horror of that fate.

Enable me to be alert to hear the weakest shout,
and quickly and efficiently to put the fire out.

I want to fill my calling and to give the best in me,
to guard my neighbor and protect his property.

And if according to your will I have to lose my life,
bless with your protecting hand my loving family from strife.

Amen.

Truly lord, bless with your protecting hand their families and all us.

The Fallen:

Captain William "Billy" Hutchinson, 48, 30 years of service

Captain Mike Benke, 49, 29 years of service;

Captain Louis Mulkey, 34, 11.5 years of service;

Engineer Mark Kelsey, 40, 12.5 years of service;

Engineer Bradford "Brad" Baity, 37, 9 years of service;

Asst. Engineer Michael French, 27, 1.5 years of service;

Firefighter James "Earl" Drayton, 56, 32 years of service;

Firefighter Brandon Thompson, 27, 4 years of service;

Firefighter Melvin Champaign, 46, 2 years of service.