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REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
AT KOREAN WAR MEMORIAL
50TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

Korean War Memorial
Washington, D.C.

4:47 P.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you very much, Secretary Cohen, for your remarks and your outstanding service. General Myers, Mr. Ambassador; thank you so much for being here today. Chaplain Craven, Chaplain Sobel; especially, my friend, Senator Glenn, whose life is a testament to the triumph of freedom.

I would also like to thank Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs Gober for being here, and acknowledge that Secretary West and Congressman Charles Rangel, a Korean War veteran, are in Seoul today leading the American delegation at the commemoration activities there; and we ought to give them a big hand, they're representing us well. (Applause.)

I want to recognize Congressman Bishop and Congressman Faleomavaega, and thank Senator Paul Sarbanes who did so much to keep this Korean War Memorial beautiful. I want to thank -- (applause) -- the members of our Armed Forces here and around the world, and especially those in Korea, whom I have had the honor of visiting on several occasions. And, of course, and especially, the veterans and their families here today.

Five years ago, I had the honor of dedicating this remarkable memorial, and on that day, many who were seeing the 19 beautiful statues for the first time, commented on how very lifelike they seemed. But one veteran wryly said they were lifelike in every way but one -- they were all seven feet tall. He said, when I think about the courage of those who fought in Korea, I remember them as being 20 feet tall.

All across our nation today -- (applause) -- all across our nation today, our fellow citizens are coming together to say to men and women who fought for freedom half a century ago, half a world away, we will never forget your bravery, we will always honor your service and your sacrifice.

As we meet today, we are blessed to live, as Secretary Cohen said, "in a world where, for the first time, over half the people on the globe live under governments of their own choosing." It has happened so rapidly that we may fall into the trap of thinking that it had to happen, that communism's fall and freedom's victory was inevitable.

But 50 crowded years ago, the world we know today was anything but inevitable. Hitler was gone, but Stalin was not. Berlin was divided. A revolution across the Pacific began a fierce debate here at home over the question: Who lost China? In 1949, the Soviet Union had detonated its first atomic bomb. As we struggled to rebuild Europe and Japan, the free nations of the world watched and wondered when and where would the Cold War turn hot, and would America meet the test.

Fifty years ago today, the world got its answer in Korea, in a place known as the Uijongbu Corridor. In the early morning hours of June the 25th, 1950, 90,000 North Korean troops broke across the border and invaded South Korea.

The only American there that day was a 31-year-old Army Captain and Omaha Beach veteran named Joseph Darrigo. He was awakened by what he thought was thunder. But when the shell fragments hit his house, he ran half-dressed to his Jeep and drove. Within half mile of the local train station, he couldn't believe what he was seeing -- a full regiment of North Korean soldiers getting off the train. Now, he later recalled, over 5,000 soldiers came against one person, me.

Captain Darrigo escaped that day. He went on to serve another year in Korea before an illness brought him home. Time has slowed him down some, but not much. And we are honored that he could be with us here today.

I'd like to recognize Captain Joseph R. Darrigo. Please, sir, stand. (Applause.)

The truth is, the leaders of the communist nations did not believe America would stand up for South Korea. After all, Americans didn't want another war; the blood still hadn't dried from World War II. Nobody wanted more rationing, nobody wanted more Western Union boys riding up with telegrams from the War Department. Americans wanted to start families. They wanted to see gold stars on report cards, not gold stars in windows.

But from the moment Harry Truman heard the news at home, on his first trip to Missouri since Christmas the year before, he knew this was a moment of truth. If an invasion was permitted to triumph in Korea without opposition from the free world, no small nation again would have the courage to resist aggression. He knew American boys didn't fight and die to stop Nazi aggression only to see it replaced by communist aggression.

So Korea wasn't just a line on a map. It was where America drew the line in the sand on the Cold War; and where, for the first time, the nations of the whole world, together at the then newly-created United Nations, voted to use armed force to stop armed aggression.

The papers ordering Americans to combat in Korea included the marvelously romantic phrase, "for duty beyond the seas." Some duty. For those who fought it, there was no romance. The war was bitter, brutal and long. In the first weeks, not much went right. Troops from the occupation force in Japan were thrown

In the first weeks, not much went right. Troops from the Occupation Force in Japan were thrown into the middle of combat, not prepared to fight a war. Their weapons were rusty. Rockets from World War II bazookas bounced off Russian tanks like stones. In many ways, it wasn't a modern war at all. Oh, there were jets and helicopters, but most of the fighting was done with rifles, machine guns, bayonets and mortars. Soldiers lived in sandbagged bunkers and stood watch on lonely ridges.

It has been said that the Americans who fought in France in 1917 would have understood Korea; that the men who served under Lee and Grant would have recognized Korea. And then, of course, there was the weather. The Cold War was never so cold as in Korea. It may be hard to believe today, but imagine: they spent a few minutes in temperatures from time to time more than 50 degrees below zero. Now, imagine trying to fight a war in it. I'm told that pins even froze inside grenades.

Many died from shock brought on by the cold. And then, when summer came, there was no relief, but instead, 100-degree heat, and dust so thick, supply trucks had to keep their lights on at midday.

There is no question: Korea was war at its worst. But it was also America at its best.

These are men and women, as the memorial says -- (applause) -- these are men and women, as the memorial says, who answered the call to defend a country they never knew, and a people they had never met. Throughout most of the war, they were unbelievably out-gunned and out-manned, in some places 20 to one. But they never gave up and never gave in. At Pusan Perimeter, troops were so spread out, if you looked left and right, chances were you couldn't see another soldier. But the line did not break.

At Inchon, troops had to scale a dangerous sea wall within a two-hour window. They went on to take back Seoul. At Mig Alley, Americans encountered the world's fastest fighter jets. For every jet the enemy shot down, our pilots shot down ten. At Heartbreak Ridge and Pork Chop Hill, wave after wave of enemy soldiers came crashing in. But our troops stood their ground. And at the Chosin Reservoir, when legendary Marine Lewis "Chesty" Puller heard that the Chinese troops had them surrounded, he replied, "Good, now they can't get away.

The Americans, South Koreans, and our allies who fought in Korea set a standard of courage that may someday be equalled, but can never be surpassed. Korea was not a police action or a crisis or a conflict or a clash. It was a war; a hard, brutal war. And the men and women who fought it were heroes. (Applause.)

There is another subject that has to be addressed here today. When the guns fell silent, some asked what our forces in Korea had done for freedom, after all; for, after all, the fighting began at the 38th parallel and ended at the 38th parallel. I submit to you today that looking back through the long lens of history, it is clear that the stand America took in Korea was indispensable to our ultimate victory in the Cold War. Because we stood our ground in

Korea, the Soviet Union drew a clear lesson that America would fight for freedom.

Had Americans and our allies from South Korea to as far away as Turkey and Australia not shown commitment and fortitude, we could well later, as Harry Truman foresaw, have faced World War III. It is, therefore, not a stretch, to draw the line of history straight from those brave soldiers who stood their ground on ridged lines in Korea 50 years ago to the wonderfully happy young people who stood and celebrated on the Berlin Wall 10 years ago. (Applause.)

Because they all stood their ground, today South Korea is a free and prosperous nation, one of the great success stories in the world, as the Ambassador said, with the world's 12th largest economy -- and, I might add, a remarkable democratic leader in President Kim Dae-Jung. (Applause.)

Because we have continued to stand with our democratic ally, South Korea, with 37,000 American troops, standing watch on the border today, just as we have since 1953, we have kept the peace. And because of all that, there is now a chance for a different future on the Korean Peninsula.

Last week's summit between President Kim Dae-jung and President Kim Chong-il, the first of its kind in 50 years, was a hopeful and historic step. It was courageous of President Kim to go to Pyongyang. He had no illusions, however. Nor should we. There is still a wide gulf to be crossed, there is still tension on the Peninsula. North Korea still bears the wounds of self-inflicted isolation. The people there are suffering terribly. But if we hadn't done what we did in Korea 50 years ago, and if the United States and its allies hadn't stood fast down to the present day, South Korea might well look the same way.

Korea helped remind us of a few other lessons, too: that our people and all our rich diversity are our greatest strength, that a fully integrated military is our surest hope for victory, that our freedom and security depends on the freedom and security of others, and that we can never, ever, pull away from the rest of the world.

And finally, for all the talk about Korea being the forgotten war, we must never forget that for some, Korea is still alive every single day. (Applause.)

In 1950, a young woman from Hannibal, Missouri, named Virginia Duncan, saw her older brother, Hallie, go off to fight in Korea. He skipped his high school graduation because he wanted to join the service so badly. In Korea, he sent letters home about every week. In one, he told them he was looking forward to a shipment of cookies from his mother.

At the same time, in Belham, Kentucky, another young woman, named Betty Bruce, watched her brother, Jimmy, go off to war. He was the 10th of 11 children. His parents had to sign a permission slip so he could join the Army at 17. When he got there, he sent a letter home saying that no matter what happened, he was all right because he had given his heart to the Lord.

Betty and Virginia never met. But in the winter of 1950, they both received the same awful news. On the day after Thanksgiving, Betty and her family got a knock at the door and two Army officers told her, her brother was missing in action. Two weeks later, four days before her own wedding, Virginia and her family were told that her brother, too, was missing in action. Not long after, the cookies they sent came back home, marked "return to sender."

For 50 years, Virginia and Betty asked questions without answers. Oh, they made sure their children came to know the uncles they had never met, they kept the pictures and they prayed. They both had just about given up hope. But earlier this month, their prayers were answered. Three weeks ago, they both learned that a search and recovery team, working out of Hawaii, had identified the remains of two soldiers in North Korea.

Today, I am honored to say that the remains of Betty's brother, Sergeant Jimmy Higgins, and Virginia's brother, Sergeant Hallie Clark Jr., are finally coming home to be buried at Arlington National Cemetery. (Applause.) I'd like to thank Virginia Duncan and Betty Bruce and their families for being here today, and ask them to stand and be recognized. (Applause.)

Before I close, I also want to say a special word of appreciation to the men and women of the Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii, known as CIL-HI. Since 1996, they have recovered more than 40 sets of remains from Korea. On Memorial Day, I announced that we had resumed talks with North Korea in hopes of recovering more. The talks were successful. Today, I am pleased to announce that as we are here meeting, the latest team

from CIL-HI is in the air, on the way to North Korea. We will not stop until we have the fullest possible accounting of all our men and women still missing in action there. (Applause.)

To my fellow Americans and our distinguished allies and friends from Korea, and those representing our other allies, we all know that Korea isn't about Hawkeye and Hoolihan, but about honor and heroes -- young men and women willing to pay the price to keep a people they had never met free.

To the veterans of the Korean War -- those here, those around the country, those whom we must remember today -- let me say, on behalf of a grateful nation: 50 years ago you helped make the world that we know today possible. You proved to all humanity just how good our nation can be at its best. You showed us, through your example, that freedom is not free, but it can be maintained. Today, your fellow Americans say: we remember and we are very grateful.

God bless you, and God bless America. (Applause.)

END 5:05 P.M. EDT