

Admiral (Ret) and U.S. Senator Jeremiah Denton

POW/MIA DAY SPEECH, 2009

GOOD AFTERNOON LADIES AND GENTLEMEN.

THIS IS INDEED AN ESPECIALLY GOOD AFTERNOON IN THAT WE ARE GATHERED HERE TO RECOGNIZE NOT ONLY THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN OR WILL SOMEDAY BE POW'S AND MIA'S, BUT ALSO TO RECOGNIZE THOSE RELATIVES AND FRIENDS OF THEIRS WHO CONTINUE TO SEEK A RETURN OR AT LEAST A FULL ACCOUNTING FOR THEIR LOVED ONES. THESE FRIENDS AND RELATIVES ARE VERY MUCH A PART OF THE PRAYERS, WORKS, AND SUFFERINGS OF THE POW OR MIA.

ALL AMERICANS ARE GRATEFUL THAT A SPECIAL DAY IS SET ASIDE TO RECOGNIZE AND TO SOLEMNLY MEDITATE ON THE NATURE OF THESE UNIQUE SETS OF PRAYERS, WORKS AND SUFFERINGS.

THIS OCCASION COMPLEMENTS OTHER SIMILAR RECOGNITION DAYS WHICH RECOGNIZE KIA'S, VETERANS AND OTHERS WHO ARE AMONG A SPECIAL CLASS OF SPECIAL AMERICANS-- WHO ARE NOT ONLY GOOD CITIZENS WHO APPRECIATE THIS COUNTRY AND ENJOY ITS BLESSINGS, BUT AMERICANS WHO ARE WILLING TO SERVE TO PROTECT THE PRESERVATION OF THOSE BLESSINGS. AND THE SERVICE THEY RENDER INHERENTLY INVOLVES THE WILLINGNESS TO MAKE SACRIFICES, ENDURE HARDSHIPS, AND RISK INJURY AND DEATH.

NO COUNTRY CAN SURVIVE WITHOUT SUCH SERVICE. AND THANK GOD THIS SPECIAL CLASS OF PEOPLE IS SHOWN A SPECIAL KIND OF RECOGNITION IN SUCH DAYS OF RECOGNITION THAT WE ARE ATTENDING TODAY.

OF COURSE IT IS FITTING THAT THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE IS THE ORGANIZATION WHICH ORGANIZES AND PRESIDES OVER THIS RECOGNITION DAY.

AS A VETERAN AND AS AN EX-POW, I AM HONORED TO BE PART OF THIS OCCASION TODAY.

PERHAPS ONLY IF YOU HAVE SERVED AS A POW OR COMBAT VETERAN CAN YOU FULLY COMPREHEND THAT IT IS NOT THE POW, THE MIA, THE WOUNDED, THE KIA WHO SUFFER THE MOST. THE CATEGORY WHO SUFFERS THE MOST IS FAMILY AND FRIENDS.

IN THE WORST DAYS OF DANGER IN COMBAT, IN THE WORST MOMENTS OF TORTURE DURING MY IMPRISONMENT, I WAS ALWAYS AWARE THAT MY PRECIOUS WIFE JANE, MY MOTHER, CHILDREN AND OTHER RELATIVES AND FRIENDS WERE SUFFERING IN WAYS WORSE THAN MINE. I SAW MYSELF AS A FIGHTING MAN NOT A DEFEATED PRISONER, AND I HAD MY OWN SENSE OF HONOR, MY OWN DETERMINATION, AND MY GOD TO SUPPORT ME IN MY FIGHT. I WAS NOT SORRY FOR MYSELF BECAUSE EVERYONE IN COMBAT ACCEPTS THE FACT THAT HE IS RISKING LIFE, LIMB, AND FREEDOM, AND HAD HOPE--THERE WAS SOME

POSSIBILITY THAT I COULD SURVIVE UNTIL MY DAY OF FREEDOM CAME.

THAT WAS A TYPICAL POW ATTITUDE --BUT LET US CONSIDER WHAT THE FRIENDS AND RELATIVES OF POW'S AND MIA'S MENTALLY EXPERIENCE.

IN THE CASE OF FRIENDS AND RELATIVES OF KIA'S, THEY ARE INDEED HIT WITH THE WORST POSSIBLE NEWS: THE SUDDEN NOTIFICATION OF THE DEATH OF THE LOVED ONE IS THE WORST SHOCK POSSIBLE. BUT THEY ARE NOT IN CONSTANT DOUBT AND, CONTINUED ANXIETY AFTER THEY START TO GET OVER THAT SHOCK. AFTER THE FUNERAL AND THE MONTHS OF MOURNING, THEY BECOME MORE AWARE THAT THEIR LOVED ONE DIED FOR A MOST NOBLE CAUSE, AND THEY PROBABLY ALSO BELIEVE THAT HE IS AT REST IN A PLACE FAR BETTER THAN EARTH.

NOT SO IN THE CASE OF THE MAN WHO IS MIA. THEY GET A SHOCK UPON GETTING THE NEWS THAT HE IS MIA. THEY COMMENCE HOPING THAT SOMEHOW HE WILL RETURN. NO NEWS AT ALL ABOUT HIM OR SOME

INCONCLUSIVE NEWS ABOUT HIM CAUSES PURE HOPE TO DEGRADE INTO DOUBT AND ANXIETY INCREASES WITH EACH DAY THAT GOES BY. SLEEPING AT NIGHT BECOMES A NIGHTMARISH EFFORT. SPOUSES SUFFER NOT ONLY THEIR OWN ANXIETY BUT ARE TORTURED BY THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF THEIR CHILDREN'S WRETCHED PAIN, AND STRUGGLE TO APPEAR MORE CHEERFUL AND HOPEFUL THAN THEY ARE FOR THE SAKE OF THE CHILDREN.

THE CHILDREN INDIVIDUALLY SUFFER IN DIFFERENT WAYS AND DIFFERENT DEGREES, DEPENDING OF FACTORS SUCH AS HOW LONG THEY HAD BEEN IN CLOSE ASSOCIATION WITH THEIR DAD, AND HOW OLD THEY WERE WHEN HE BECAME MIA.

MIA ISSUES DID NOT BEGIN WITH VIETNAM. THERE ARE 88,000 AMERICANS STILL LISTED AS MIA FROM WW1I, THE KOREAN WAR, THE COLD WAR, AND THE VIETNAM WAR. THE WAR ON TERRORISM AS IT PROCEEDS WILL INVOLVE MORE MIA'S.

OVER THE YEARS SOME OF THOSE MISSING FOR PROLONGED PERIODS HAVE BEEN DECLARED KIA, BASED ON REASONABLE EVIDENCE.

THIS CHANGE IS SIGNIFICANT TO THE SURVIVORS BECAUSE, AMONG OTHER THINGS, IT BEARS DIRECTLY ON THE ISSUE OF BEING ABLE TO RECEIVE LIFE INSURANCE AND OTHER BENEFITS PAYABLE ONLY AFTER DECLARATION THAT THE SERVICE PERSON IS KIA.

OF COURSE, THIS DECLARATION CAN CAUSE ADDITIONAL SUFFERING BECAUSE HIS SURVIVORS FROM THEN ON CAN ONLY SPECULATE ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM, AND HAVE TO ABANDON ANY SHRED OF HOPE THAT HE CAN RETURN.

SUCH SUFFERING, AND OTHER KINDS OF SUFFERING ASSOCIATED WITH WAR JUSTIFIES GEN SHERMAN'S SAYING, "WAR IS HELL."

BUT ONE QUALIFICATION TO THAT EXCLUSIVE DEFINITION LIES IN THE SIMPLE QUESTION: ARE THERE NOT SITUATIONS IN WHICH WAR IS THE LESSER FORM

OF HELL THAN THAT WHICH WOULD EXIST IF THE WAR WERE NOT FOUGHT?

THAT QUESTION SHOULD BE ASKED BEFORE ANY CHIEF OF STATE DECIDES TO COMMIT A NATION TO WAR.

WHEN THE CALL HAS COME, OUR MEN AND WOMEN IN UNIFORM HAVE SHOWN, AND CONTINUE TO SHOW THEY ARE WILLING TO ANSWER THAT CALL TO SERVE WITH HONOR. I SALUTE THEM AND THOSE DEDICATED FAMILY MEMBERS WHO CONTINUE TO KEEP THE FAITH.

IN CONCLUSION, LET ME JOIN OUR DISTINGUISHED HOST, THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE, AS WELL AS GENERAL CARTWRIGHT, IN EXPRESSING APPRECIATION AND THANKS FOR YOUR BEING HERE TODAY.