

Remarks on Presenting the Presidential Citizens Medal to Raymond Weeks at a Veterans Day Ceremony

November 11, 1982

The President. Good morning, and welcome to the White House. This morning we're honoring an American patriot, Raymond Weeks, of Birmingham, Alabama.

For more than 50 years, Mr. Weeks has exemplified the finest traditions of American voluntarism by his unselfish service to his country. As director of the National Veterans Day Celebration in Birmingham for the past 36 years, Raymond Weeks, a World War II veteran himself, has devoted his life to serving others, his community, the American veteran, and his nation. He was the driving force behind the congressional action which in 1954 established this special holiday as a day to honor all American veterans.

It's a pleasure for me to present Mr. Weeks the Presidential Citizens Medal, given to those who have made outstanding contributions to their country. And, Mr. Weeks, in honoring you, we honor the ideals that we hope to live up to. Your country is mighty grateful for what you've done.

Mrs. Weeks, I'm going to hand you the case, because I can't do this with one hand. [Laughter]

[At this point, the President pinned the medal on Mr. Weeks.]

Mr. Weeks. Thank you, Mr. President. Thank you on behalf of the combined veterans associations -- [applause] -- --

The President. Ray, thank you so very much. Please sit down here.

It is fitting that we pay tribute to Mr. Weeks on this day when we remember the sacrifices of those who donned this country's uniform and did their part to protect our freedom and independence. Words alone cannot express our gratitude to the brave men and women who took on the task of protecting our country from foreign threats and aggression.

President Coolidge once said, ``The Nation which forgets its defenders will be itself forgotten." Nothing is more important to the soul of America than remembering and honoring those who gave of themselves so that we might enjoy the fruits of peace and liberty. And that is the spirit of this special day and of this coming Saturday, when the Nation will dedicate the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, a tribute that is long overdue.

For too long, America closed its heart to those who served us with valor. It's time that Vietnam veterans take their rightful place in our history along with other American heroes who put their lives on the line for their country. Certainly, mistakes were made. But the reality of Vietnam today -- massive prisoner camps for torture and political indoctrination, hundreds of thousands of boat people sacrificing everything and risking a painful death to flee Communist oppression -- all this suggests that the cause for which our Vietnam veterans fought was an honorable one.

This Saturday, America will put behind us the ingratitude and injustice of the past. We'll move forward in the spirit of Abraham Lincoln, who in 1865 said: ``Let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

And although we'll be putting the divisiveness of Vietnam behind us, we will not forget those who are still unaccounted for. Today I renew my pledge to the families of those listed as missing in action that this nation will work unceasingly until a full accounting is made. It's our sacred duty, and we will never forget them.

Along with Raymond Weeks, I may be one of the few people in this room who remembers when Veterans Day was called Armistice Day, commemorating the armistice that ended the First World War on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of the year in 1918. And I might add, I not only remember when it was called that day, I guess we may be the only ones that were on the streets in the wild celebration of the first and actual Armistice Day when it was signed.

Armistice Day honored those who gave their lives in "the war to end all wars" -- a day of hope that they had not given their lives in vain. But within a few years, and in spite of an impressive effort on the part of the Western democracies to limit arms and to outlaw war, aggressors rearmed and war came again. Ironically, Armistice Day was made a legal holiday in the United States in 1938, just 1 year before a second and more terrible conflagration swept across Europe.

Winston Churchill labeled it the "unnecessary war," because he said there never was a war more easy to stop. And no man had more right to say that than Winston Churchill. He had fought the illusions that led to war, pleaded with his countrymen to recognize and arm against this expanding totalitarian war machine, pleaded with his countrymen to be strong and to have courage -- not because he wanted war, but because this was the only way to preserve peace. Yet, for all this, Churchill was castigated as a warmonger.

Even after war broke out in Asia and in Europe, our own country was slow to take the steps necessary to defend itself. Warning us of the impending crisis, a young Harvard student, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, wrote a book titled "Why England Slept." His thoughtful study holds as true now, 42 years later, as when it was first published. After describing how a dictatorship with a controlled press and the power to silence political opposition can carry on a vigorous arms program, he noted, "In contrast, in a democracy, the cry of warmonger would discourage any politician who advocates a vigorous arms policy. This leaves armaments with few supporters. Among the reasons for England's failure to rearm in time," Kennedy wrote, "probably the most important was a firm and widely held conviction that armaments were one of the primary causes of war." Well, the Western democracies didn't wake up till it was too late. It took Pearl Harbor to shake Americans from their complacency.

Today, in this era of much more dangerous weapons, it is even more important to remember that vigilance, not complacency, is the key to peace. This administration is committed to rebuilding our national defenses, which were permitted to erode during the last decade. We're now in the initial phases of that rebuilding, and we must continue to press forward in the years to come if we're to maintain a credible deterrent.

But let the world understand: Our purpose is not belligerency, but respect; not conflict, but deterrence; and not war, but peace. None of the wars that I have mentioned, or others before them, ever came about because this country was too strong. We shall never flag in our pursuit of a more peaceful world.

Our goal is peace -- peace that's achieved through a stable balance of forces, a mutual reduction of weapons, and a better understanding between the Soviet Union, the United States, and all nations.

Earlier today, we received word of the death of Soviet President Brezhnev. And I want to read to you, if I might, the letter that I have sent this morning to Vasilii Kuznetsov, First Deputy Chairman of the Presidium in Moscow.

[At this point, the President read the letter, which is printed as the next item.]

Now, I've said for many years there are fundamental differences between the Soviet system and our own system here in the United States. But I believe our peoples, for all our differences, share a desire and a dedication to peace. On this day, dedicated to American veterans, we honor the brave men and women who have by their service preserved our liberty. Our parades are a celebration of freedom. Our banner is Old Glory, and we hold her high and proud. This is the legacy of the brave men and women that we honor today.

So let us go forth from here, having learned the lessons of history, confident in the strength of our system, and anxious to pursue every avenue toward peace. And on this Veterans Day, we will remember and be firm in our commitment to peace, and those who died in defense of our freedom will not have died in vain.

And, again, we thank the man who has made Armistice Day into this Veterans Day -- Raymond Weeks. And thank you all for being here.

Note: The President spoke at 10:01 a.m. in the State Dining Room at the White House. The ceremony was attended by representatives of veterans organizations and administration officials.